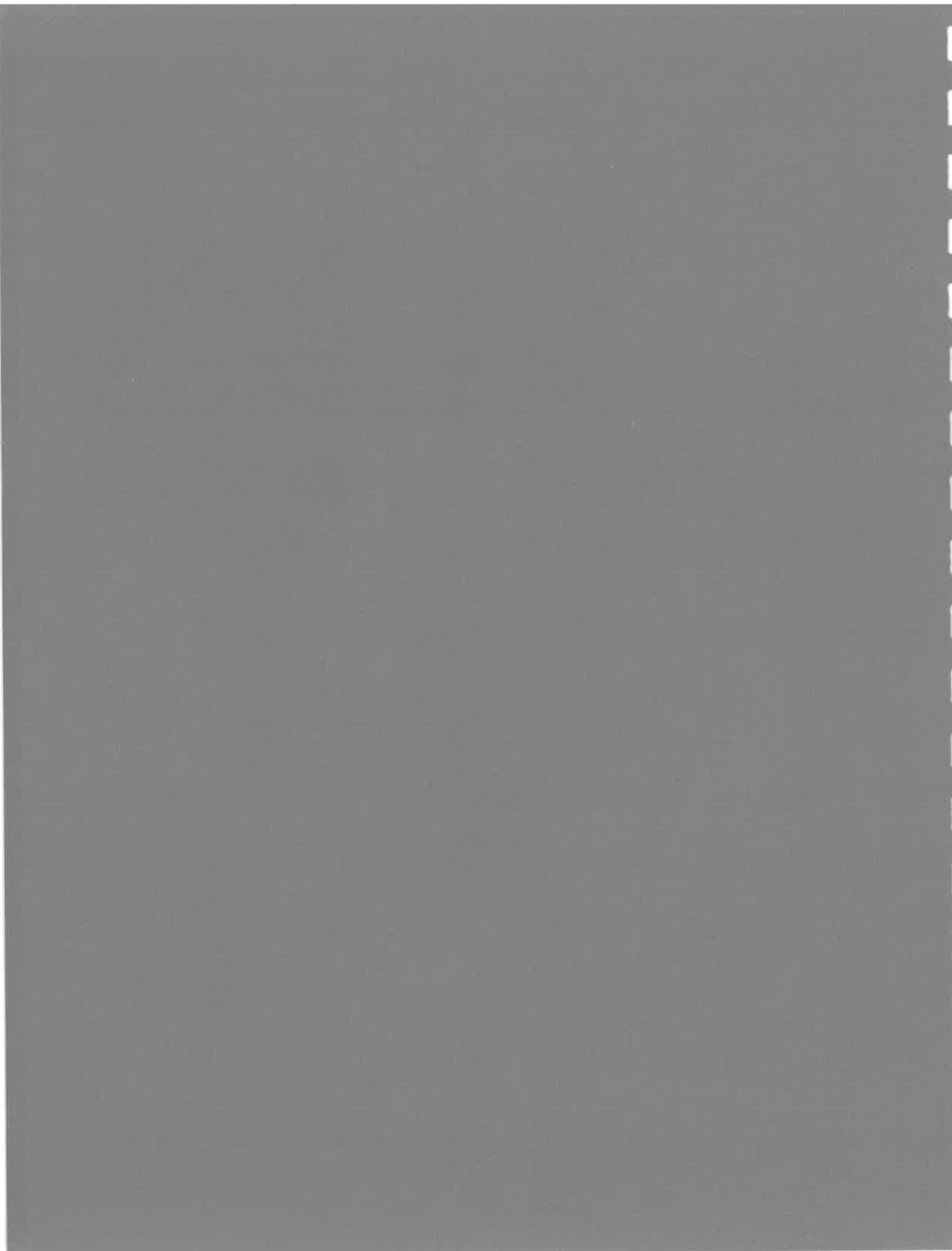


TORCH TALK

COLLECTION

volume two







PRO WRESTLING TORCH PRESENTS

Torch Talk Collection

VOLUME TWO



Cactus Jack

W.K.

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JIM HERD

Jim Herd was hired as executive vice president of WCW Jan. 3, 1989, when Ted Turner purchased Jim Crockett Promotions. Since that time, Herd has been in a position of power in pro wrestling and has been, as people in his type of position usually are, criticized for many decisions. In the following "Torch Talk" interview conducted July 26, 1990 Herd discusses his first 18 months with WCW along with responses to some of the criticism he has received.

Keller: What is your personal background in pro wrestling?

Jim Herd: I have directed wrestling for years, along with roller derby and other type shows. I directed some of Vince McMahon Sr.'s shows in Washington and in Philadelphia for Kaiser Broadcasting. I subsequently went on to be close friends with Sam Mushnick in St. Louis, in my opinion, one of the best wrestling promoters that ever came down the path. During that tenure as general manager of Ch. 11 I worked closely with Sam on his promotion.

Keller: What were the goals set for yourself and WCW when you were hired by WCW?

Herd: The primary goal for the purchase of

Crockett Promotions by Turner was to supply the SuperStation (TBS) with four hours of wrestling programming weekly and to assure that those ratings were acceptable by the TBS staff and by Turner himself. And that we have done. We are the highest rated show on the SuperStation and we are going to maintain that.

Keller: Were there other goals such as house show attendance or becoming number one in wrestling?

Herd: Our second goal, obviously, is to make the thing a paying proposition. The house shows have to be an integral part of that and obviously we have struggled in that area. Sometimes you are torn between television ratings and successful crowds at venues. Although we intend to do both successfully, at this particular point the venues have been injured by the amount of stuff that we have put on television. The fact that we do four Clash of the Champions per year and five pay-per-views per year (hurts house show attendance).

Keller: Do you have any ideas or plans on how to get past that "catch 22" situation and build house show attendance while sustaining or improving TV ratings?

Herd: I think it probably boils down to the amount of personnel that's involved, so that you can successfully do a high energy television show for television and project those storylines into the venues without overusing the same people. And that's one of the things we are looking at.

Keller: What is an average day like for Jim Herd?

Herd: Well, they vary. You might say it's a thrill a minute. They normally start at 8:30 and end around 7:00. Those office days are filled with interfaces. In today's wrestling world, in fact, coming back from the Goodwill Games the other morning the first thing I was greeted with was four lawsuits from four wrestlers' lawyers. I can't comment on those because they are in litigation. That's how the face of wrestling has changed and a lot of our time is spent in that area.

Keller: Now that you have been involved with WCW for over a year and half, do you have new goals or are you still working on the first ones?

Herd: I think we've successfully proven that we can do television with ratings. I think we've successfully proven we can do a live three hour show on television that has caught the excitement of our viewers. Our pay-per-views are growing. They obviously haven't reached the stages that Wrestlemania has and I don't know that they ever will. They have reached a level of success that we can live with at this particular moment as the universe increases. I think that the Clash of the Champions ratings speak for themselves. I think the peak ratings for the last Clash of the Champions out of Charleston, S.C. had a peak rating of five-point-whatever, an audience of

seven and a half million people. So that's big. It proves, too, that wrestling not only has a loyal following for the venues—and hopefully we can do enough wrestling to get that audience back in those seats—but that it has a casual audience of millions who enjoy it.

Keller: There have been several situations that have caused hardcore fans to hold up signs such as "We've Herd Enough" and those types of comments. One of those was the situation where Rick Steamboat, who had been a "company man," did not have his contract renewed. Sting, meanwhile, had his contract renewed. Can you help clear up this puzzler?

Herd: There have been a lot of things written about Steamboat's departure. Actually, there is no animosity on my part toward Ricky. We couldn't reach an agreement point on a contractual basis. After that fact, when he left, the so-called "smart guys" thought that it was a firing or a quitting-and-huff deal. It wasn't that way, at least in our view. It was an amicable departing, saying, "Hey, if you ever want to work for the deal I've offered, call me. We can talk about it."

Keller: Was the difference relatively small?

Herd: The money difference, depending on what avenue of life you're in, was big money. We're talking about thousands of dollars. The real part of this, and I can understand it, is Rick Steamboat wanted to work only a limited time and spend the rest of it with his family. And in a business like ours, that is a request that is very hard to fill.

Keller: Was that similar to Tully Blanchard's situation in that he was only able to work limited dates?

Herd: Well, we tried to work with him on a job that he was supposed to have had with Coca Cola which never came to pass. It was to a point where Coca Cola was getting the best part of it, so we just broke off conversation.

Keller: Is there any chance Tully Blanchard will be coming in?

Herd: At this point we haven't had any conversations. Ole Anderson is the booker, obviously, and if he were to want to bring Tully Blanchard in, I wouldn't block it.

Keller: You have also taken criticism for ideas that were said to be yours, such as "Long John Silver," "The Ding Dongs," and "Robocop." Were those ideas indeed yours and how do you feel about them in retrospect?

Herd: I feel that there is a fine line that this company is trying to walk between two universes of audiences. One is the loyal wrestling fan who we revere. The other is a kid and teen audience that is an upscale audience, that has been developed by Titan Sports. We don't want to steal their audience, we just want to borrow them for an hour. And I think that we can walk that line, although there's going to be criticisms,



Jim Herd

Photo by WK

certainly. I'm not a guy that gets bitter over criticism. I'm a free-enterprise, say what you think type of guy. I think everybody should be entitled to that thought process. But, I'm going to try to satisfy both of those audiences without trying to alienate either one of them. It's a tough job, but I think we can get it done. We already wrestle a hell of a lot more than they (the WWF) do and we are going to continue that. We will also introduce characters. I think that when I introduced the Ding Dongs, number one, the Ding Dongs were never introduced correctly. They were supposed to have a huge bell on the corner where they could get some high energy and noise into the scenarios. I think I went that far with the Ding Dongs to try to convince the committee at that time that I was very serious about having entertainment value in wrestling that heretofore had not been into our shows.

Keller: You mention high output. How important is a superior workrate in WCW compared to the WWF?

Herd: I think it's important, even when you're developing characters, that we look at how well they can wrestle first. Then we develop a character after that. I think that we will continue in that vein. Unfortunately the training grounds are drying up. And we will have to revert to training ourself.

Keller: Would you like to do that with an established regional promotion?

Herd: That's a possibility. We don't go in on top of any local independent shows and try to book on top of them. We are very friendly with most of the independents around. Unlike Vince McMahon, I don't know whether he feels this way, but he was quoted as saying he wanted to be the only wrestling entity. I'm sure if that's a goal of his, that's one he's not quite going to be able to attain.

Keller: Was it true that earlier this year the NWA was considering purchasing the AWA and USWA?

Herd: No. Never either one. We talk to Verne Gagne all the time. We talk to Jerry Jarrett all the time. We were never going to purchase either one of them. We looked at ways we could interface on a regional basis.

Keller: Why did that not succeed?

Herd: I think one of the things you need to understand is that, number one, Turner doesn't like partners. And he doesn't need partners for that matter. We're still having conversations with Don Owen and Verne and various people in wrestling and will continue to do so. I don't think we will ever return to a regional type situation because it just isn't in the books.

Keller: What are your thoughts on the concern some have in the NWA and have had in the past over newsletters?

Herd: The *Observer*, obviously has been on me

Unlike Vince McMahon, I don't know whether he feels this way, but he was quoted as saying he wanted to be the only wrestling entity. I'm sure if that's a goal of his, that's one he's not quite going to be able to attain.

for over a year and I still speak to Dave Meltzer. In fact, I had a conversation with Dave Meltzer at the last pay-per-view. Once again, it's a free world. You can say what you want. I think that we're dealing with mass audience here. Although I don't read all of the newsletters, I think if I lumped them all together and put them all in a rating book, that they probably would be a rating that would get you thrown off a station. But I think they serve a purpose for people that are into wrestling to that extent. One of the things we probably aren't going to do is run the NWA like you want it run. I think everybody's entitled to a look at it their way. I think everybody has their favorite that they'd like to see get pushed more than we do. I think it's the American way and I wish them all success.

Keller: How were WCW and Ted Turner willing to condone the racial comments and angles that occurred last May?

Herd: I had a handful of phone calls. We've had a hell of a lot more resistance to, for instance, the Terry Funk incident with the plastic bat, than we ever had over the racial slurs. I think it's because most of our fans understand the reason it's being used and that it is a tongue-in-cheek representation. I happen to believe very sincerely that Sapphire kissing a shoe or Rick Rude gyrating over a lady in the ring has a lot more detrimental effect on the young people than anything we'll ever do. I don't know why we're taken to task, just because we're the NWA, and Titan Sports never seems to.

Keller: I agree, but shouldn't a certain amount of taste be considered when deciding what makes the airwaves?

Herd: I think you can look at it in a variety of ways and you can look at it your way. I also know that our tag team champions' pictures are on 120 cars of the modern railway in Atlanta.

Keller: And I think fans, me included, appreciate the push Doom (Ron Simmons & Butch Reed) has received.

Herd: I'm not going to sit here and try to tell you we don't make mistakes. We do and we will continue to, but it won't be because we are not trying to give the fans the best possible television show and venue show we can.

REFLECTIONS

Jim Herd: This interview was the second "Torch Talk" I conducted with a top wrestling executive. The first was Verne Gagne. Herd was the first who was fully aware of what he was getting into when he agreed to the interview, meaning I was going to ask questions about the inner-workings of the industry.

Herd answered his questions with the corporate-speak that works in the front office but wears a bit thin on wrestling fans or those who follow the business closer than just looking at numbers. In an effort to put his stamp on the in-ring product, he pushed for the introduction of the Ding Dongs, Robocop, and Long John Silver, which showed very little knowledge for what it was about the WWF's characters that drew money and even worse, no knowledge that that era was coming to an end.

Herd didn't have any special ideas on how to draw at house shows while also staying competitive with TV ratings. He even tried to defend racial slurs on his TV by saying they didn't get as many complaints as when Terry Funk put a plastic bag over Ric Flair's head.

I never was impressed much by Herd's grasp of wrestling or his desire to learn more. He seemed like a nice enough guy, but over his head. He may have been a major reason it took WCW, with Turner's backing, 8 years before becoming competitive with the WWF.

Cactus Jack: Interviewing Cactus Jack early in his career was a job because he was open and genuine, inspired and full of dreams. He opened up his world to the reader as much as anyone who's done a Torch Talk. The progress on his career between the first and second interview is a fascinating tale.

In the interviews he talks about not wanting to be a comedy wrestler, but rather wanting to be taken seriously. His new role as Mankind is the ultimate transition from Cactus Jack, who always had a sly, humorous, spit-in-the-air-and-catch-it side. Early grains of Mankind's character can be seen in Mick Foley's comments in this interview. As I write this, Foley is approaching his first true main event on a major show, headlining a WWF pay-per-view against Shawn Michaels. Given the content of this interview, it's got to be a very special time for him professionally.

Jerry Jarrett: Jerry Jarrett is a survivor. Although he's apparently not involved in the day-to-day operations of the USWA anymore, he is the last survivor of the territorial promoters who were demolished by McMahon and their own mistakes. Jarrett has often been criticized for being cheap with payoffs, yet gives a respectable, sensible defense of that policy in this interview.

With his recent front office experience in the WWF, he gives one of the more insider looks at what it was like working opposite of Vince McMahon during a trying time for the WWF.

CACTUS JACK

Cactus Jack is far from the average prototype of a wrestler. It is exactly that fact which has made him one of the most colorful, top young stars in pro wrestling today. After a couple of years wrestling for the CWA and USWA, Cactus Jack was hired by the NWA. Less than a year later he has voluntarily left the NWA for reasons discussed below. The following is part one of a "Torch Talk" conducted on June 16, 1990.

Wade Keller: What led to your recent departure from the NWA?

Cactus Jack: I would say that I had gotten away from a lot of the reasons that people were interested in me in the first place, that when I first came people were generally interested in what I did from a serious standpoint, and by the time I left... Let me put it this way, Kevin Sullivan, as the lead of the "Slaughter House" had been very helpful to me as to how I conducted my matches and what I did during my matches. He explained there was a fine line between comedy and seriousness in a pro wrestling match. When I came to the NWA I thought I was on one side of the line, and by the time I left I didn't like the idea that people maybe were watching my matches in order to get a good laugh from some of my antics. I thought that repertoire of moves should lend

itself to being taken seriously and by the time I left I didn't think that was the case with a percentage of fans.

There were a lot of people who, because they could relate to it, would appreciate it. But I think the vast majority of wrestling fans can't appreciate a lot of the things I do and the more comical aspects of my matches were what they remembered. That's not what I wish to be remembered by.

Other than that, there does seem to be an emphasis on seasoned veterans and I thought that my enthusiasm and hard work should have made up for some of my inexperience. I've been wrestling for four-and-a-half years now and that seems like a long time to me and a lot of people. But the athletes in the NWA right now seem to have a lot more years than that. So when I weighed both things out, I talked to a lot of people who I was close with in wrestling and I figured it would be best for me to get out for my future in the long run.

Keller: Would you eventually like to return to the NWA?

Cactus: Definitely. I left with every intention in the world of returning. If you had asked me when I started in the wrestling business where I would like to be, I would have said the NWA. If you had told me I would walk out on a sizable amount of money in the middle of a pretty good stream of popularity, I would have thought you were crazy. I found myself thinking of wrestling as more than just a paycheck and a job, so I was willing to hit skid row for a while in order to come back hopefully with a better idea of what I want to accomplish.

Keller: Have you found yourself being a "cynical 25 year old" instead of an "optimistic 23 year old" as you suggested might happen before you entered the NWA?

Cactus: I just turned 25 eight days ago. No, I'm not cynical. I'm very optimistic about the future. At the time I gave that interview, I was wrestling in Texas. Although they had pretty good syndication, my exposure wasn't nearly as widespread as it is now. I feel really good knowing that the people I look up to in wrestling really respect what I do and respect my work ethic. In that sense, I'm optimistic about coming back because I think I know what I have to work on. I think my strongest point is knowing what I'm good at and knowing what I'm not good at and looking at it realistically. I'm just looking to build on that for hopefully a return to the NWA or WWF or wherever I go.

Keller: What are your plans now?

Cactus: My plans now, I figure, I've been on the road for a couple of years and haven't spent much time at home, and because I've gotten good national exposure it will give me some time to make some money and live at home and hopefully heal up from the pains I cause myself

and other people caused me while I was in the NWA because I do get banged up. And from there if the NWA wants me back, I'd love to go there. If the WWF wants me, I'd love to go there. After working independently for a while, if it means going back to one of the smaller organizations and working day in and day out on things that will get me back into the big time, then that's what I will do.

I'm scheduled to wrestle for the IWA a few matches in June and several matches in August, so I like to think that whatever group I work for, I take pride in what I do that they'll get the best I have to offer. My whole career is really built around working hard. If there comes a time when I'm just looking at paydays to get off as easy I can it's probably the time when I'll find something else to do.

Keller: What was the best part of working for the NWA?

Cactus: The money was important because it finally gave me a chance where I could save some money and not think that if my next match was my last match, what would I do? It gave me a chance to put some money in the bank, but that made me want to work all the harder to put more money in the bank.

Aside from that, it was nice to wrestle on a television show where the announcers were top-notch to where people, especially Jim Ross and Jim Cornette, and all the others, Lance Russell, Michaels Hayes, Jimmy Garvin, they were all really good trying to get to the people what I was trying to do in the ring. There were a lot of times in Texas where I know I worked hard and the announcers were just not good enough to get that over to the people. I'd be spitting up blood in a match from something internal and Marc Lowrance would treat it like it was a day at the beach. That was a definite plus for me, as I'd watch my matches and I'd enjoy them. I wouldn't get frustrated because people weren't getting my message.

I do think there is a message to my matches. What it is, maybe that's for you guys to figure out. I think I have a handle on it. But I do think, like I said, wrestling is more than a paycheck and a job to me. There are those who question my actual wrestling ability, but that's all right. Because when I get out of the ring, I generally feel good about what I've done inside.

Keller: How about the worst part of working for the NWA?

Cactus: Some of the parts that are so bad for other people, like travel and being away from home really wasn't a problem because when you have no one to miss, you don't miss anyone. For me, I enjoyed going to the different towns. I liked all the guys I worked with. Some of them were really good friends of mine. Up until the end, there really wasn't a bad side.

Maybe not getting the credit that I felt like I deserved, although I feel I got it from people



Cactus Jack

Photo by WK

When I saw a girl when I was in school unconscious or lying passed out, the furthest thing from my mind was romancing her. All I wanted to do was drop an elbow on her.

inside the wrestling business. Sometimes I'd go and I'd hear fans say certain things. When you wrestle as Cactus Jack you expect a certain amount of harassment. But certain things you hear from people, it's just a case of ignorance. They weren't getting the message I was trying to get across. That was the only bad part where I felt I failed to have an effect on some people.

Keller: Who did you enjoy working with the most?

Cactus: Actually, the match where I had the most fun was in Corpus Christi, Texas when Stan Lane was hurt and I was the one-time member of the Midnight Express. So I wrestled with Bobby Eaton against Brian Pillman & Tom Zenk. Even though it was a one-time shot and Bobby being one of the best wrestlers ever to lace up his boots carried most of the load, it was a chance for me to be in a truly great match, and I felt like the chemistry between Jim Cornette, Bobby, and myself was great for the first time. Other than that, I wrestled Mike Rotunda quite a bit and I felt we always gave the people their money's worth. My matches with Norman and Abdullah were always exciting. It wasn't so much a wrestling match as it was a theme. Maybe that's what I'm best at anyway.

Keller: Do you see yourself wanting to wrestle for a long time?

Cactus: When I see myself wrestling for a paycheck and it is no longer fun and I'm no longer nervous or thinking about my matches and new moves, that's probably the time to get out. I had set a limit for myself that I would get out of the wrestling business if I wasn't making good money by the age of 26. I started making good money at 24. And now I feel like the people in wrestling know what I can do, and I have a lot more confidence because I've been there and I've done very well. In spite of some of the fans who might have just looked at me and said, "Why is this guy without muscles in there? In spite of people like that, there were a lot of people who said they wanted to watch me on TV. We have several million people who watch the NWA that at least every time I came out at least a few thousand people across the country were saying, "Hey, watch this guy and watch what he's going to do." That's a high that can't even be explained. When it's not fun anymore, I like to think even if I was making good money, I'd like to get out. I heard a line in a song that said, "It's better to burn

out than fade away." And I think my style probably lends itself to burning out.

Keller: I think you're right. Why did you choose wrestling originally as your profession?

Cactus: I'd say there are two types of people wrestle. There are those who are told to get in it because they believe they can make a lot of money. And there are those who can't think of anything else. I was one of those people that couldn't think of anything else. When I saw a girl when I was in school unconscious or laying passed out, the furthest thing from my mind was romancing her. All I wanted to do was drop an elbow on her. Experiences like those, almost religious experiences, let me know I had to at least try this thing. Now for the people that want to make a lot of money and find out that's not the case, or not usually the case, well then getting out is no problem. The people who love it and then are never given the chance either due to lack of ability or just they are not in the right place at the right time, for them it's a much tougher road to get out. And if I had never been given the chance where each door that slams on you could be your last chance, I was able to open the door every place I went and now I'm in a position I know thousands of wrestlers across the country would love to be in.

I was just at an independent show last night and the feeling you get with the guys meeting you, they feel they are meeting someone they want to be like, and that's why I say I grew up watching mostly WWF guys, but certainly enough of the guys in the NWA like Arn Anderson, Ric Flair, and The Midnight Express—that just upon leaving, these guys were able to shake my hand and tell me I did a hell of a job, that's a lot of communication. I sense that some day those independent guys would like to be in the position I'm in.

Keller: For instance, being able to voluntarily leave one of the top two promotions in the country?

Cactus: Yeah, that's not a position many people are in. Like I said, if somebody had told me I would do that, I would have had their head examined.

Keller: Who were your great influences in wrestling?

Cactus: My teacher was Dominic DeNucci and I know you have a rating system for the wrestlers in the *Torch*, but I have a rating system of my own. Hard work, a lot of balls, a lot of imagination, and proper training. Now there are a lot of people who work hard, there are people with imagination, there are probably a few people with as much balls as I have, but maybe they miss that proper training and never get that shot. Maybe they've got a few things going for them.

There are several other reasons someone might get their chance. It could be a hell of a body, great

amateur background. But for me, I think those are the four keys. And maybe, natural charisma. I was just a hard worker that had proper training. So without Dominic DeNucci and without the setting of Freedom, Pennsylvania and the old run-down elementary school with no heating, no air conditioning, and without some of the guys like Shane Douglas to work out with, I don't think anyone would know who Cactus Jack is.

A few more names. Shane Douglas, because he was the guy who said, "Hey, I want to try something wild. Can you go in there and help me?" Then there were the guys who were always good with advice, like Robert Fuller. When I was first learning, guys like Terry Taylor, Chris Adams, and King Parsons. I think in general a lot of the wrestling people have just liked me. Probably personally and because they liked my work ethic and were willing to help me. NWA guys like Jim Cornette were always willing to give advice. There are others. I feel like I'm giving an awards speech.

Keller: Who do you feel is underrated by the fans?

Cactus: Bobby Eaton, I would say myself, Mean Mark. I don't know if he's underrated by the fans, but I see him as a big man who knows how to wrestle as a big man. He has less experience than I have and he knows more about what it is he's trying to do than I do. Mostly the people all respect the NWA wrestlers for their ability, there's just a few people who are extraordinary that don't get all the respect they deserve.

Keller: Did politics ever get in the way of you achieving your maximum success?

Cactus: There's always a certain amount of politics. You would be stupid in any field to say there isn't. The bitter part of me wants to say there was (in the NWA), while on the other hand that basically a guy in today's sport with so much of an emphasis on great bodies, a guy with a terrible body, no friends or relatives in the business, who didn't kiss anybody's ass—the fact that he was given the chance to enter the big time and display what he can do, I would have to say I was given a pretty fair shot. Anybody can say they should have been given a better shot than they were, but that notwithstanding, I would say I was given a lot of TV exposure and nobody ever told me not to do anything but my best.

Keller: If you were to stop wrestling, god forbid, what do you see yourself doing?

Cactus: If you asked me a couple of years ago, I might have had an answer. Right now, I don't have a clue, Wade. A friend of mine was just asking me that a couple of days ago.

Keller: A couple of years ago what would you have said?

Cactus: A couple of years ago I would have said I'd try to use my college degree to work in

TV or radio. Now I'd go so far as to say a lot of people have thought my style might lend itself to a wheelchair or traction for a lifetime as one writer put it. In a way, a big injury might not be so bad because maybe it would force me out of wrestling in a few years and force me to look at myself and what I'm going to do for the rest of my life.

Keller: What does Cactus Jack do for fun besides wrestle?

Cactus: I'm not, sad to say, the most multidimensional guy around anymore. I do have some fun. I can't explain what it is, because I don't go out much. I don't do much else. I do a lot of resting, a lot of recuperating. But I manage to have a good time.

Keller: How much of the on-air personality of Cactus Jack is the same as the off-air person?

Cactus: A lot more than people would think. The only difference is the off-air one is a lot calmer. When people tell me I have a great act, I don't believe that for a second. I think I have a great feeling. There are times when I go out there, I don't know if the people can tell, but I can tell that I don't feel it and I'm trying to act. I consider it more of an on-air personality. For people who really watch me it is a really interesting personality. People who only watch one or two times might not see the different dimensions of the character. Jim Cornette described me well when he said, "Cactus Jack doesn't have matches. He has surreal paintings." Some of the things that me and Sullivan did weren't really matches, but they were something. They were some of my favorite matches to watch.

Keller: How do you see yourself ideally being promoted?

Cactus: That's the problem. I don't know how I see myself being successfully promoted. I don't know if I'm Cactus Jack Monster or Cactus Jack...

Keller: Manson?

Cactus: No. I never considered myself a Charles Manson type. That's why I wanted to do away with the name. Some people still say it and it bothers me that it's still around. I don't know if I should be promoted as a monster or as a ... I don't know if I'm there to make the people smile or to make them drop their mouths in awe. I don't care what people do. I like to hear them cheer; I like to hear them boo; I don't care if they're silent. I just want them to be interested. I could go out to complete silence and that doesn't mean no one cares. I think people are forced to think about whether they want to boo or cheer me and there are a lot of noble things about the way I wrestle and there are a lot of scummy things about the way I am. Some are going to like it, some aren't, and some are going to sit and say, "I want to watch this match." And of course there's going to

be other people saying, "What the hell is this guy doing in here?" I don't care if they cheer or if they boo, as long as they take an interest.

Keller: What are your thoughts on Ole Anderson?

Cactus: A guy who does what he believes in. He is extremely honest and forthright. Maybe his idea of wrestling and other people's, including mine, may differ, but I give him a lot of credit for sticking with what he believes in and always being upright.

Keller: Ric Flair the wrestler?

Cactus: Someone I take a lot of pleasure in just watching. Someone's tapes which I'll watch in my free time. Probably the ultimate technician.

Keller: Kevin Sullivan?

Cactus: A guy I believe took a genuine interest in seeing me do well. Someone I thought blended well as a tag team and an attraction. And someone with whom I had some very exciting moments in wrestling.

Keller: Terry Funk?

Cactus: I'd say an inspiration to anyone who follows wrestling. I wouldn't hesitate to put a picture of him on my wall.

Keller: Jim Ross?

Cactus: Definitely someone I admire because he saw potential in me when I was in smaller groups. He was also able to convey to the fans, sometimes better than I could do, what I was doing. A great announcer and a very knowledgeable wrestling person.

Keller: Jim Cornette?

Cactus: Very helpful in his advice. One of the funniest guys I know. Along with Bobby Eaton, the best travelling companions I could ask for.

Keller: Paul E. Dangerously?

Cactus: I only knew Paul a few weeks in the NWA but I felt I had known him a lot longer. He was very talented. I just hope he can keep his temper long enough to make some money.

Keller: Buzz Sawyer?

Cactus: A real hard worker. Great at what he does.

Keller: Did you really jump off houses... and why?

Cactus: I jumped off a basketball rim and my house as part of a Class D motion picture that a friend and I made. There was a landing pad, but I tell you what, after the first take, the camera never zoomed in, so all you saw was a blur. The second time when I jumped off the house, that landing pad was crushed, that took... (laughs) it took some gumption to do. Maybe that will turn out to be a collector's item. Maybe that will turn up on the readers' pages. "Wanted: Tape of Cactus Jack jumping off house." It's sitting on my shelf.

CACTUS JACK

One year ago, Torch Weekly began a three part series of "Torch talks" with Cactus Jack, which turned out to be one of the most popular Torch features in 1990. One year later, Cactus is one year wiser, one year older, engaged to a woman he says is stranger than he is, and has toured Japan with Baba's promotion. This "Torch Talk" with Cactus Jack was conducted May 31, 1991.

Keller: How did you go about getting a tour with New Japan and deciding who to work for?

Cactus: At first, I was introduced to Japanese wrestling maybe five or six years ago by Brian Hildebrand, also known as Mark Curtis. And I noticed the whole action in Japanese wrestling was something different to look at. I remember the first time seeing Dynamite Kid and Tiger Mask, I marvelled at it and couldn't believe that was a form of professional wrestling. And upon a closer look at that match, it wasn't really that much different. It was just the speed and tenacity that separated it from what I saw in America. And watching some of Brody's things and some of Hansen's things, that my style was All-Japan oriented. So when people started catching on to the things I was doing in Texas or even some of the earlier things in Memphis, I remember some Japanese photographers coming to take some pictures of me. I got really excited because I thought that, hey, this is my chance to make some money because, as some of your readers probably realize, Memphis and Texas are not really the places to make money. A year went by and I came to the NWA and I guess some more people became aware of some of the other things I was doing. And Jimmy Suzuki mentioned that Mr. Baba was very interested in me going over there, but at the time I had just started with the NWA and that was my dream job. I didn't want to do anything to jeopardize it.

I couldn't believe when I left the NWA that there were people going to Japan that I didn't think fit in with the style, but they were getting trips and I wasn't, so it was pretty disheartening. Sometimes, at least in my mind, I realize that things happen for a reason. I realize that had I gone over there two and a half years ago or if I had gone over there as soon as I left the NWA, I don't think my trip would have been nearly as successful.

When I left the NWA, I guess I started to become an anti-hero with some hardcore fans and I became friends with quite a few of them and they used to send me tapes just loaded with Japanese wrestling. This gave me a chance to really get familiar with a lot of the people like I mentioned, Brody and Hansen and some of the guys who work a similar style to that. When I

look back on it, that was really instrumental with me being successful over there—which I thought I was. There was a time when I was sick where I would watch maybe 20 hours of Japanese wrestling in a 24 hour day. By the time I went over there, I knew every guy in Baba's group, I knew every move they liked to do, and I had the advantage of being an American who knew on his first trip what would work and what wouldn't. Not all of them, but I knew for example that you just didn't go around pulling hair or poking eyes or doing a Three Stooges act over in Japan.

Keller: Generally, were the Japanese fans easier to please than American fans?

Cactus: For me, the Japanese crowd was much easier to work than an American crowd in a much different way because they were responsive to hard work and once you got them responding to the work, whatever showmanship you did was easy to get over with them. For example, Wade, I did everything under the sun over there. I only had two TV matches over there, but you have to remember that I wrestled 23 times in 28 days over there. I tried a lot of different things and I did a lot of the same things I had been doing but with a lot more frequency and I'm still hurting from when I was over there.

Keller: Did you do your spit-in-the-air-and-catch-it routine in Japan?

Cactus: That's an interesting story. I was trying everything I could do and was really putting my body on the line, but in the end the move I was best known for when I came back was spitting in the air and catching it in my mouth. There are some great pictures in Japan, there's just a classic picture in one of the Japanese magazines from Budokan Hall of me spitting in the air and the fans in the background looking up in the air and my tag team partner looking at me like he saw a ghost. It was great. I had someone translate it and they called it the "famous spit in the air." It's already famous and I've only been there a month.

Keller: Do you feel at all cheated with that being your most famous move after all of the hard work and other tremendous wrestling moves you executed?

Cactus: I kind of got, not disheartened, but I look through the magazines and I had done some pretty good things at Budokan Hall and I look and all they showed me doing was spitting into the air. But I think overall a lot of the Japanese fans really appreciated my style. I was really impressed or really flattered when one of the guys told me the talk my second day there among the hardcore Japanese fans was that they couldn't believe it was only my first trip there.

Keller: Why do you think fans reacted that way? What did you do that others haven't?

Cactus: It was more or less that I had come prepared for a task as opposed to some guys who think they're just gonna wing it over there. There were a couple of the younger guys shoving

referees and doing things that Japanese fans weren't interested in seeing.

Keller: With all of your preparation, was there something you did that you wish you hadn't or that you won't do again?

Cactus: As a matter of fact, there are some things I wish I had done that I didn't get a chance to do. The best moves I have are still up in my head.

Keller: That's pretty scary. What did you find being really different about the in-ring styles between Japan and the United States?

Cactus: Aside from the obvious fact that it is more action-oriented—and I'm not saying that the wrestling in the U.S. isn't, because after watching SuperBrawl, there obviously was some great wrestling there—but look at the top match on the show, The Steiners vs. Sting & Luger. If that's not a Japanese style match, I don't know what is. I was reading a Terry Funk interview where he said he thinks eventually that's what fans are going to turn into, that they will come to appreciate the moves more and not so much the good guy vs. bad guy thing. I said one time on the John Arezzi show, someone asked me if I was a good guy or a bad guy. I said that depends, was Custer a good guy or were the Indians? You have two different schools of thought. I think I go out there and do the same style every night and one of the things that I got a kick out of since I became an independent is that depending on where I wrestle, I get a totally different reaction.

Keller: Do you like that or does it make it more difficult to prepare for matches?

I find it is a great benefit to me as a wrestler allowing me to grow because especially—I don't know how many of you have seen my UWF matches—but I went out there and was predominantly cheered, I would say more than most of your so-called fan favorites. I was put in a position where the only way to get the fans interested in the match was to provide non-stop action. Not throw the whole good vs. evil thing out the window, but to let people get into the action rather than the characters.

Keller: Do you agree with Terry Funk that the wave of the future in this country might be without heels and faces and based more on action?

Cactus: I don't know. I spent a lot of time talking with Stan Hansen over in Japan and I would ask him just simply, "Why can't it be done like this in the States?" Hansen would say, "I don't think it ever will because the people have been educated to the point where if it's not good vs. evil, they're not interested." But I see the guys like The Steiners vs. Sting & Luger and people really getting into the action was a definite plus.

Keller: That seemed to also be the case with Flair vs. Fujinami, where the good vs. evil idea was not pushed and the action was what the

fans were interested in during the match.

Cactus: Yeah, in Japan you have Jumbo Tsuruta vs. Misawa or even Taue over there where usually if tag team partners, if they have a match together, even if Taue isn't as experienced as Jumbo, I mean the people are just waiting for each guy to get their top moves in. One of the best moments of the tour for me was the third night there when I fought Jumbo and lost, that was a TV match, and the fans gave me a standing ovation when I left. I then really knew I was going to enjoy that place.

Speaking of that good vs. evil thing, one of the most memorable moments for me, one of the things I loved, I know a lot of you guys have taken trips, almost like religious journeys to Japan to see the wrestling. I felt privileged to sit there and watch some of the matches, like Dynamite Kid operating on such a beaten' up body. And I'm not just talking TV shows, I'm talking spot shows with maybe 1,500 or 2,000 people. Granted, those people are paying 40 to 50 dollars a ticket, but I watched those cards from first match to last match and I enjoyed them all. What I was saying was one of the most memorable moments for me was at Budokan Hall watching Hansen & Spivey win the title from Gordy & Williams in one of the best matches I've ever seen. The people were so behind Hansen, cheering his name over and over. The next night when I wrestled Hansen I heard again the same guy. But fans also chanted, "Cactus, Cactus." It really—I just wish the people would appreciate the athletes over here more.

Keller: Was Japan's schedule comparable to your schedule with the NWA?

Cactus: Yeah, in the NWA, but it was different because you wrestled the same guys much more frequently. Japan was great because it's a hell of a feeling when you go out there with a guy you've never seen before except on TV, a guy who doesn't speak your language, and you may never speak to him in your life, and you go out there and share a common... I don't know if it's a goal to have a good match together, but you're out there making something happen. And really, the feeling of spontaneity to me is far more superior than the feeling in the NWA.

Keller: Match for match, how much more demanding was Japan than wrestling in the U.S. for the NWA?

Cactus: I'll tell ya' what, I tried my best to work my hardest in the States to the point where I didn't do hardly any socializing. I mean, my idea of a good time was to finish my match and watch a couple more matches and then get back in bed as early as I could on a Saturday night. But it was physically challenging in the NWA. I would say the mental challenge is a lot tougher in Japan because you couldn't rely on old standbys. You couldn't say, if worse comes to worse, I'm going to yell at the crowd because in Japan they won't go for that. Or if worse goes to worse, and I feel like taking a little breather, I just grab his hair and

grab his tights, because that's not what people are buying. Also, for the first time in a while, in Japan I really had to question my endurance. I felt there was something wrong with Japanese clocks. They would say it had been only five minutes and I'd be about ready for bed. It may have been psychological. Since I've been back I've been working really hard in the American rings and I don't even think about getting tired. I think when it's on your mind you're going to suffer a lot more than if you're worry-free about it.

Keller: Which Japanese wrestler did you enjoy wrestling the most?

Cactus: Even though I only wrestled him once, I think (Kenta) Kobashi. It was a TV taping but not a TV match and it was a very good match and I think it had the potential to be excellent. And also just wrestling Dynamite Kid again. I had wrestled him in the second match of my career and more or less just destroyed my jaw. That was six years ago and my jaw still bothers me, believe it or not. I saw that clothesline coming again six years later and I felt like a Vietnam soldier having flashbacks. But I survived it this time. It was just great, like I said just the idea that one night you can wrestle Danny Spivey and the next night you can wrestle Kenta Kobashi and the matches will be completely different but appreciated both times. I think that variety is good, and I think it's been a big plus since I left the NWA. I think in the NWA one tends to settle for having good matches. Even I settled for having good matches when I was in the NWA. I once was talking to one of the guys and he said, "Cactus, I love your stuff. You've had so many great matches." And I said, "I disagree. I don't think I've ever had a great match." He didn't know what I was talking about. I said, "When I first got into the business I realized from being a fan for years that the only thing people remember are great matches and great moments and very little else. And some of my moments stuck out in my mind and I couldn't even remember the matches. And I knew I wasn't capable of having great matches so I set about providing as many great moments as I could. And I think I succeeded in that, but as far as having a really great match, I don't think I did that until I left the NWA. And now I think I've done that quite a bit with a variety of different people.

Keller: You are most famous for your recent matches against Eddie Gilbert. Tell me about those?

Cactus: I didn't beg, but I mentioned to several people that I would be interested in wrestling Eddie on a regular basis in the NWA. I wanted to wrestle somebody who also took pride and wasn't willing to settle for having just a good match. I thought I needed somebody like Eddie to draw a great match out of me. I don't know if you have seen the last couple of tapes of me wrestling Eddie in Philadelphia - I'm going to go

out on a limb and I don't want to sound cocky or arrogant, but I don't believe there is a better independent match in the country. And I don't believe there are that many better matches in the country, or the world for that matter, period. I was thinking about this, and I don't want to come off to your readers as thinking a lot of myself, but a lot of the time you get comfortable in a groove, but I knew if I dropped an elbow off the apron or if I did a clothesline over the ropes that people were going to like my stuff and that they were going to consider me a hard worker when in truth I considered myself lazy.

Keller: Because you thought you were underachieving?

Cactus: Right. For instance, when I was with Devastation Inc. in Texas, I think I settled into a comfortable groove as a second banana to Gary Young. Now Gary Young's a great wrestler, but that was never my goal to show people I was a main event guy. When I was with Kevin Sullivan - and we had some classic moments there - I don't think I ever appeared to anyone as main event material.

Keller: You mentioned in a past interview that you were perceived by fans as more of a gimmick side-order as opposed to a main event calibre wrestler. Do you believe that has changed?

Cactus: I really think that we are going to find out very soon. When I talked to you last summer, about fifty-one weeks ago to be exact, I said I left because I wasn't sure where my character was heading. I wasn't sure if I wanted to be looked at as a monster or a circus side-show. And I think at the same time, I was dropping elbows off the ring apron and having my head rammed into cement. At the same time, people were saying, "Yeah, I get a kick out of him." Now I don't think people say they get a kick out of me. I think to the people who don't know me, they're scared of me. And I think interview-wise, I've become comfortable with being Cactus Jack. It used to be guys would sit around doing interviews and say, "Awe, I feel kind of stupid doing this and trying to act like I'm mean when I don't really feel like being mean right now. Most of the time, I really felt the character; I didn't feel I was putting on an act. I felt I was expressing a feeling, drawing upon something already in me.

Keller: A surreal painting, as Jim Cornette described you.

Cactus: Right, right. Thank you. But since that time, I think I've really reached a turning point because Joel Goodhart can call me at eight in the morning for a show and wake me up and, boom, I really feel like me, like Cactus Jack. Sometimes when I'd get ready for a big match I'd think to myself, "I'm just fat Mickey Foley and I don't really belong out here." Now, I mean, Collett, my wife to be...

Keller: Congratulations.

Cactus: Thanks. She was looking at a match with me in the falls count anywhere match with Eddie Gilbert and she said, "Why aren't you walking around?" I was just standing in the ring kneeling on one knee. I said, "Collett, my heart was pounding so fast, you know, I was nervous, but at the same time I had an image of what I was going to do in that match, and I did it. I'm a lot more comfortable with the idea of creating... I don't know if forcing emotions out of people is even possible in professional wrestling, but if I can do it, I'm gonna' try to do it. Like I said about people being afraid of me. I know you did a write-up of the match where I ended up dropping an elbow on John Arezzi. You know, no one thought that was funny. I'm looking around and I'm not hearing the normal boos and cheers and pops. Then I looked at the tapes with John. It was the same reaction as at the Dallas Sportatorium with Terry Funk and Jerry Lawler. People were just standing around with their mouths kind of hanging open. I love the idea of a mother and a kid and her husband buying tickets thinking they're going to get a couple of chuckles and they either see a chair across the back or something they didn't expect to see and it's kind of disturbing to them. At this point I would rather disturb people than entertain them because I know that when I get back in the NWA or wherever I may go, it's not going to just be the casual fans anymore. People are going to get the chance to get in touch with what I'm doing. I really believe if I was given five weeks to do interviews, to talk and to get myself and my character out in the open, people would respond to it as a main event type of person.

Keller: The feeling I get from people who talk about your matches is that you have definitely moved from a gimmick to a main event calibre performer with a style of someone like Stan Hansen who does whatever he wants whenever he wants.

Cactus: I appreciate you saying that, especially drawing the comparison to Stan Hansen. I learned an awful lot from Hansen while I was in Japan and an awful lot from tapes of guys like Brody. I would look at their matches from Japan and I would say, wait a second, Brody's not taking backdrops on the concrete and he's not dropping elbows off the apron. So why are his matches so damn more intense than mine. And the reason was just the attitude. Like I said as hard as people thought I worked, I still did a lot of walking and talking, a lot of little laughing at the crowd. I will be honest with you, Wade, I heard a wrestler who has been around a long time who was talking like he had the answer to all the world's problems. He said, "The object of professional wrestling is to do just enough to get the job done, get by with the minimum, but don't give them any more." And I thought to myself, "Maybe that's why all the arenas are empty. I feel like a lot of people look at me like I'm a glorified stunt man and maybe that's not unmerited,

maybe there's some truth in that. But I really feel that in the past year or the past two years, really, NWA time included, that I can have a good match with my eyes closed and not think about it. But let me talk about the difference with a guy like Eddie Gilbert. I wanted to call up Eddie and thank him for letting me have the best matches of my life.

I wrestled Eddie a few times in the NWA, but we were in a position as being in the first match on a card, once again, our job was to just work hard, have a good match, and get people into the card, but there's just not that attitude that we are going to show the people a match that they're going to be talking about. I remember being at that big fan convention in New York at the end of August and I was talking with my fiancée. As a side comment, it's really nice, pointing to that comment in my last "Torch Talk" a year ago as an example - where I said that when I was in school when I saw girls, I wanted to drop elbows on them. I always thought that if a woman entered my life, it would really take away from my goal and my drive as a wrestler. And I happened to come across probably the one woman in the world that would make me weirder. For a while, I didn't know who was the gimmick in the family.

Back to the fan convention, when I was scheduled to face Eddie, I was telling guys that they were going to get to see something really special, one of the matches of the year at Joel Goodhart's show in September. I had my goals set so high for that match because I was finally in a match with a guy I knew I could go all out with. And I ended up disappointing everybody, myself, Eddie, Abdullah the Butcher, everybody was a little disappointed with that match. I tried to figure out why and I found out through time - I mean, I was incredibly disappointed, I was down on the business; later that night I went out and wrestled Abdullah the Butcher and I kind of redeemed myself, having the kind of match I knew I could. And I tried to figure out why the match with Eddie was so disappointing. Eddie had just turned heel in Memphis and the people cheered me when I came out, so all of a sudden I was the good guy and I wrestled like every good guy and his brother I had ever seen. So I'm doing armdrags and working the leg until I finally realized people cheered me because they liked the things that I did. They weren't cheering me because I armdragged and worked legs. So that helped me a lot when I received cheers with the UWF or independent shows or whatever, but people were cheering because they appreciated the hard work and in order to maintain the cheers, I would do more of the same.

Keller: You got to be on the next Goodhart card against Eddie unexpectedly, right?

Cactus: Yeah. In fact, we weren't even supposed to be on the next Goodhart show, but Wahoo and Manny cancelled so Joel just kind of threw it in as a little filler where falls counted

anywhere. I mean, since that match, I have been on every single Joel Goodhart spot show and Eddie and I have been transformed into this hardcore item. I mean, we had that match - I hope some people have a chance to see it - which in my opinion was the best match I ever had. And I did thank Eddie for allowing me to have the best match I've ever had. Then we had the barbed wire, and I'm going in saying to myself that I was going to have the best barbed wire match ever. And when it was finished, the match wasn't as good as the match I had in my mind. Then I started thinking about it the day after and the day after that and I'm thinking, maybe that was the greatest barbed wire match ever... Maybe it was.

So I give Joel Goodhart a lot of credit for giving me the chance for the first time in my life to be in the main event of a major show, and that will be at Pennsylvania Hall at the Pennsylvania Civic Center on August 3rd. I would like to mention that match. To me, I've had a promoter get mad at me for wrestling too long and for using tables and chairs and things like that. But inside I know I've got this dedicated little following and when there's twenty people out there chanting "Cactus Jack" and have possibly driven a great distance to see that match, I don't want one person to say, "It wasn't worth the ride." So if a promoter is going to tell me to tone down what I do, I don't really want to work for him.

I mean, Ric Flair has never done the minimum to get the maximum. Bruiser Brody never gave the minimum to get the maximum. I don't believe that pulling the wool over the fans' eyes is the way to build houses.

Keller: August 3 features a unique contest against Eddie Gilbert in Philadelphia. Tell me about that bout.

Cactus: It's the best of three falls, but it is going to be three different matches at three different times in the card. The first match on the card is a falls count anywhere match. The second fall of the match is right before intermission and it's a stretcher match. The third fall is the main event, a cage match. So I'm in a position where my goal for that night is to have the best falls-count-anywhere match ever, the best stretcher match ever, and although there's been thousands of cage matches, the best cage match ever.

Keller: And does Eddie have the same goal?

Cactus: I would like to think so. He really looks forward to these matches more than I do and I wish we could wrestle on a regular basis. I mean I'm thinking through different things that we can do in our time. Believe me, Wade, if any of your readers take the time out to go to that August 3 show, I would really like to think that I can send them home thinking they've never seen anything like that. I can't see why the NWA or WWF or All-Japan... why I'm not working full time someplace. But if I were Jim Herd or if I



Cactus Jack vs. Eddie Gilbert

Photo by WK

were Vince McMahon, I would seriously think to myself, if this guy is doing these types of things at an independent show, what kinds of things would he be willing to do on a major show? And Wade, the answer is: I don't know.

Keller: You might explode just trying to fathom the anticipation?

Cactus: Like I said, sometimes I'll be thinking about these matches and I can barely contain myself in the car. My face starts trembling and I start doing interviews in my head; not out loud, but in my head. I realize that there are people that thought I wouldn't be able to last six months in the business, people putting me down for not being so-called smart to the business, but a lot of those guys are back washing cars in Tennessee, while I believe my best days are still ahead of me. I came to the conclusion that a lot of people felt I got a raw deal in the NWA and that Ole Anderson didn't like my specific style, but like I said at the beginning, a lot of things happen for a reason and if I were to have stayed in the NWA and continued to make the good money I was making, I think I would still be part of a crowd and I think any potential I had as a main eventer in this country would be over. Let me put it this way. I'm engaged now. Three weeks after I left the NWA, I met my future wife. We're working together in a pretty successful modeling agency. I now have another new profession as a second-income consultant. I'm planning for my future. I used to have one goal in mind, which was to be a wrestler, but now I have more. And now that I have more goals in mind I think it's actually made me a better wrestler because I don't have to worry about getting hurt or worry about where my next meal is coming from because I have things to fall back on. Someone once said that if

you have things to fall back on, you're going to fall back on them, you're going to cut back your goals. To me it just means I can work harder.

Keller: And take more risks?

Cactus: Yeah, take more risks. So maybe I should thank Ole Anderson. I think maybe your readers view this as me becoming cocky, but when I was in the NWA, I believed in myself that yeah, I could do certain things. But now it takes a lot more belief in yourself to think you can actually get people out of their homes to buy tickets. I've never proven to anyone, including myself, that I could sell ticket one. So I wonder, maybe I'm setting myself up for a great disappointment August 3, but even if three of your readers come in from different parts around the country, and I hope that certain people will, and I would like to be able to guarantee them possibly the best match they can possibly see... for a fat guy.

Keller: Some may take you up on it. How is your body holding up?

Cactus: The only problem I have now—I don't know if you saw the match I had with Jumbo Tsuruta—I took a pretty bad bump off the ring apron and I guess I tore either the muscle or the ligament off my bone. It's the kind of thing where the muscle will go back on as far as I know and what people have told me, but it won't attach firmly. So now it's well past two months since I hurt it originally and it's at its worst now. I wrestled with some bad ribs in Aruba and Cartuso and another island and I had what I thought were some of my best matches. When you can't rely on your old standbys, it forces you to think. And believe me, I can have a good match without taking a single bump if I have to.

Keller: It's like the old saying that I just made up: An artist creates his best works when his mold breaks.

Cactus: That's good. Yeah, I like that. So I'm worried about how soon my body's going to heal. That's why I'd love to wrestle in Japan because you're not in a position where it's the end of the road because you're going to have a break in two or three weeks. I feel if I went to Japan I could wrestle for maybe the next ten years. If I went to the WWF or the NWA, maybe it would only be three or five years. I've surprised myself and probably a few fans in staying as injury-free as I have. I mean, when you ask me what my proudest achievement is in wrestling, I think it is that I've only missed four matches in six years and that was due to bronchitis and a staph infection.

Keller: Considering your style there's no question that's amazing.

Cactus: Yeah, I'm really proud of that.

Keller: What is your newest memorable moment?

Cactus: I think the newest memorable moment

is the whole thing that went down at the barbed wire match against Eddie Gilbert. Afterward, I legitimately could not stand up. I was stuck in the barbed wire ropes so long and the barbed wire was stuck in my face and I have pictures of it, and it's kind of gruesome—no, it's very gruesome. Barbed wire was sticking in my face and nobody was there to help me. Every time a wrestler came out to help me, Eddie Gilbert was putting me down. I had barbed wire sticking in my face and in my neck. I read somewhere that I had suffered terrible facial wounds, but actually you can't even tell anything happened because I never pulled out. Had I pulled out, my face would have been a disaster. But I waited long enough in the ropes with the ropes cinched around my neck for people to help me get out, then I pulled the wire out of my face. There were just tiny holes. It could have been really bad, and the feeling of total helplessness was terrible.

Here we were in front of possibly the hardest core crowd in the country and I have my future wife next to me holding my head in her lap and no one was laughing. When I say I couldn't stand up, I mean it. My knees were buckling due to the cutting off of the oxygen. I think anatomically it was the old sleeper theory where the oxygen is cut off from the brain. All the wrestlers were huddled around me and I almost felt guilty feeling better. The truth was, I was pretty satisfied with myself.

Keller: Does it scare you that something like that could happen again where in ten minutes you're not going to feel better? Or is that just part of the thrill?

Cactus: No, to me, part of it is the thrill. Part of the thrill is knowing that maybe if that match had taken place as part of an NWA or WWF pay-per-view, that they would do big business as a result of it.

Keller: It doesn't surprise me that that is your most memorable moment because a year ago your most memorable moment was a time in Texas when after one of your matches people were calling the hospital wanting to know if you were okay when you actually walked away from the building after the event.

Cactus: All of my great moments have come... let me put it this way, none of my great moments have ever come as a result of getting my arm raised. It's always been when people call the hospital or wrestlers call acting like I should be dead saying, "My best wishes."

Keller: Have you developed more cynicism toward the business or more enthusiasm since I last talked to you?

Cactus: I actually think more enthusiasm. Wade, it's like I wondered why people were getting trips to Japan when I thought I was more qualified. And I wonder why people are going to the NWA and the WWF when I believe I am more qualified. But I'm living everyday, I'm

I'll tell ya' what, I tried my best to work my hardest in the States to the point where I didn't do hardly any socializing. I mean, my idea of a good time was to finish my match and watch a couple more matches and then get back in bed as early as I could on a Saturday night.

happy every day.

Keller: I was going to ask, do you believe you are the happiest person in the wrestling business today?

Cactus: I have some anger that comes out during my interviews, and it's legitimate. And it's great to get it off my back and it makes for great interviews and then it's out of me. I think a lot of people are going to be surprised at what I can do as far as a promotional interview. And yeah, I may be one of the happiest men in the wrestling business because I know I'm just waiting for my chance. And I know that when I get it I'm gonna' finally be able to do something with it.

Keller: If you had your choice, would you rather have a very consistent run in Japan at the top or near the top or would you rather get that thrill of the interview facet of wrestling through a run with either WCW or the WWF as a main event wrestler?

Cactus: That's a toss up. There are so many benefits to wrestling full time in Japan. There're so many benefits to wrestling full time in the NWA. I still think I've got a lot of room to grow and I'm not just a wrestler now; I have other things that I can do. Some of my best moments have been on John Arezzi's show, trading banter with Paul E. and others. Jimmy Cornette was co-hosting with Joel Goodhart on his radio show when I was on. Cornette told me that was the funniest seven minutes he's heard without someone telling a joke and Goodhart told me that he was stuffing things in his mouth to keep from laughing on the air when the context of what I was saying wasn't funny. Like I said, when you can get the master to really appreciate what you're saying, that means a lot.

Keller: On that note, I will let you go. Thanks for your time. I and the Torch's readers appreciate your willingness to talk on record so openly so they learn more about what goes through the mind of a not-so-typical pro wrestler.

Cactus: Thanks for listening, Wade.

JERRY JARRETT

Jerry Jarrett, rated as one of the "Ten Most Powerful People in Wrestling" in the Pro Wrestling Torch 1992 Yearbook, is the head of one of few full-time promotions in the United States, the USWA. In the following June 2, 1993 "Torch Talk" interview with Jarrett, he talks about everything from his start in wrestling to becoming a promoter, to promoting against Vince McMahon, to his current position working as an assistant booker for Vince McMahon.

Wade Keller: What is the extent of your relationship with the WWF?

Jerry Jarrett: The extent of it is very simple. It's been made a lot of and most of it is more than it actually is. I called Vince after so many years of hearing and assuming Vince would not help anybody. I found him to be very concerned about the state of the business and the future of the business, very complimentary of our (the USWA's) position in the business. In a nutshell, he told us over the phone, "How can we help you?" I said, "Well, you can help by letting us have one of your stars every once in a while. And in return for that, if you ever find anybody, I'll train him for you and you can put him under contract. We'll train him and give him a stage to learn his art. That's our deal."

Keller: Who pays for the transportation and match fee?

Jarrett: We do.

Keller: Really? So he's letting you use them, but he's not really subsidizing their appearances?

Jarrett: We've gone through stages of trying it. I used to think that his wrestlers, as he finished them up, would draw for us. I found out that they won't. If they're not one of his box office stars on his shows, they're not one on ours, either. He has been extremely gracious and kind. When we call him and ask him for somebody, he makes them available to us. That is, of course, within a given framework of them being available. If he's got a big tour, we can't do too much. We're selective in who we choose now because we're a small little operation, so we can't pay a big trans and a salary if someone can't carry their weight.

Keller: How would you rate your personal dealings with McMahon thus far?

Jarrett: In our relationship, he has given ten times more than he has gotten. There is absolutely no motivation for him to help us here in Tennessee. None. I knew that going in and in phone conversations before our meeting, he knew where I was and I knew where he was.

Keller: Do you think his attitude would have

been different before his status of perceived invulnerability was shattered last year during the media scrutiny? Do you think that when everything was going well for him and he controlled the media like clay in his hands that he would have been so giving to you?

Jarrett: I don't think so. Simply because our lack of contact was because of me. I was really amazed that he even talked to me because I had been one of his big detractors. I spearheaded his only possible threat when I got Verne (Gagne), Eddie Einhorn, Eddie Graham, Bill Watts, and Jim Crockett together, and we produced those four shows in Memphis to go against him. The whole country knew I got everyone together and organized it and talked them into all pulling together. Of course, Watts and Crockett self-destructed. We had phenomenal success at the Meadowlands and they all said, if he can do this producing in Memphis, we can do it (alone). It just self-destructed that night in the Meadowlands. When I finally called (McMahon), the first thing he said was, "Well, where have you been so long?"

Keller: Where do come down on the issue of steroid use in wrestling? Do you believe you are rewarding steroid users by hiring them and if so, is that wrong in your view?

Jarrett: I don't think anybody has ever rewarded someone for using steroids. I think that all wrestling promoters have one goal in mind and that's drawing a big house. That's what we wake up in the morning trying to accomplish. The public became very enamored with massive physiques. And this is nothing new. You'll notice statues that the Greeks made were all of enormous, muscular athletes. So, I think the promoters said this is what the public wants and this is what we can draw with and they went after that. Hulk Hogan started out for us here in Tennessee. When he came here, steroids were, you know, talked about openly. In those early days, we didn't know the damage it could do. We didn't know about 'roid rage, that it altered your personality. Hulk (Hogan) would give himself shots in the dressing room. Now, could somebody construe that Jarrett took Hogan—and he was green and really couldn't work—and put him in the main event with Lawler because he used steroids? That's bull sh—. I put him in there because he had the most incredible physique I had ever seen. With his limited working ability, he drew us money.

Keller: With your current knowledge, being around wrestlers enough to distinguish to a certain degree some who are definitely on steroids, do you do anything to tell them that taking steroids is not necessary to work for you?

Jarrett: No, I don't tell them that. I tell them "Maybe you have, as with AIDS or with syphilis or with alcohol, maybe you don't know steroids will kill you. They will cause your heart to explode, they will cause your hair to fall out, they alter your personality to the point you become

insane. Or you can kill or be killed in a fit of rage. I want you to be aware of this and I also want you to know it is in only small degrees you look better than Jeff (Jarrett) and he is a relatively middle-sized frame person—he is not really big-boned—and you can accomplish the same thing by going to the gym every day for seven years. Most of the guys who come in here who are developed beyond Jeff's development look freakish. A number of guys that come in and have openly talked about being on steroids, I have told them, "When you cycle and come down, you will shrink—if you don't kill yourself first." Just on a personal basis, I try to pass on the wisdom that I've gotten. I've gone to our doctor and to the medical journals long before it was made against the law and said, "What is this? Jeff wants to get into wrestling." This is when he was a 170 pound basketball player. As a family I told him, and he made the decision himself with my encouragement, that he would never use steroids.

Keller: Obviously people are going to look at Jeff Jarrett today compared to his size when he began and assume at some point he used steroids. Do you believe for a fact that Jeff has never used steroids?

Jarrett: Absolutely for a fact. I have a great relationship with all of my children and I tell them all that I was their age once and tried all kinds of sh—. And we were going to all have a physical every year and the doctor was going to check for everything, so I told them they would only be able to fool me for a year, then all of my wrath will come down on them. So we don't do drugs of any kind in my family. And when they move out, they can do what they want to. Well, Jeff goes to the same doctor and still gets the same test every year. And it's not that I'm checking up on him, because Jeff's more level-headed than I am. I know I was swayed and did some things when I was a kid that I'm not happy with. So we've had this open relationship since they were little. Very few people say anything to Jeff because they know, sick or well, he's in the gym seven days a week and has been for seven years. So everybody knows. Jason is like Terry Funk. Jason wrestled last year at 140 pounds. He decided to bulk up so he would have a better chance at football. He weighs 188 pounds now. He went from 140 to 188, so all of the guys say that is impossible, nobody can gain that much weight in one year, 48 pounds. But Jason works out every day, eats six meals a day, and is on the same thing the Dallas Cowboys are on; it's called Performance Gain. It's incredible. Jason, if he keeps that up, will end up as a senior at 210, 215, so everybody will say that. Hell, one of the coaches came up and asked if Jason was clean. I said, "Yes sir, but if I were you and I had a football team, I'd have them all piss in a bottle." But you know that anytime somebody sees rapid growth, they're going to think it's steroids.

Keller: I asked this same question to Jim Crockett Jr. What if you were presented with

tapes of two prospects, one who appeared to surely be on steroids and the other appeared not to be on steroids. Even if the steroid user would draw more money, would you ethically chose to hire the smaller guy if he was similar in every other way?

Jarrett: If they're equal in talent, then it gets down to my interview with them on the telephone. I don't make steroids a policy one way or the other. If they ever pass a law that says, "If you know a performer is using steroids and you don't fire him, you're being unlawful," I'll fire them. But they haven't said that yet. In my position, and remember I have held this position most of my adult life, I have drawn a line between the areas that I have responsibilities in their lives. I have excluded everything that I can because mine is not a good position to be in, especially in the climate today. There are a lot of guys, that if I don't give them a break, they don't get in the wrestling business. And if they come here and don't make it, their career is down the tubes. That's not to say there's no other place to make it, but there are so few choices. The same can be said for Jim Cornette's SMW, the WWF, and WCW. When there's only four places to work, you have to make it in them. Hopefully Crockett and that thing in Texas will be a fifth place. But I don't get into whether wrestlers are gay or straight, whether they sleep with white girls or black girls, if they do steroids, if they do cocaine. I don't make that my business. What I do make my business is how they conduct themselves while they are being booked by this office, and that includes in the ring and out of the ring. The natural progression is, I'm not going to tell somebody, "You can't work here because I suspect highly that you use cocaine." I will tell you this, everybody that does cocaine, it alters their personality to a point that I end up terminating them. Do you see the difference?

Keller: Here's where I would say there is an argument that steroids should fall into a different category. Wrestlers have the perception that if they are bigger, they have a better chance to get hired. You said that you consider 3 out of 100 tapes. If the ones who make it are on steroids, the perception is, "I need to be bigger to make it." You are furthering that by hiring people with steroid-enhanced physiques, especially if that user is displacing a non-user with similar talent. Do you agree with that?

Jarrett: Here are the only areas that I have found. Unless a person is on a tremendous quantity of steroids—and I mean a really tremendous quantity—then they swell up and have acute acne and then you can tell just by looking. But I know first-hand that guys who have a so-called wrestler's body as opposed to a bodybuilder's body that I would have bet money wasn't on steroids, have come to me after they found out what it could do to them and said, "I was cycling. I'm gonna' cut that stuff out. Look what happened to Superstar Billy Graham." And I would have bet money they weren't on steroids.

So there is no way you can put yourself in that position because I have had people in the business look Jeff in the eye and say, "I bet you \$10,000 you're on 'roids." And Jeff says, "You don't have to bet that. You don't have \$10,000, but I do. I'll put it up and all you have to do is put up the \$300 for the test." Now, let's say Vince McMahon buys into your argument. We're talking about looking at the guy coming in. He can't tell. Wade Keller can't tell. And nobody else can tell. Now there are some very obvious cases. I tell you, those people flunk out when I interview them on the telephone because it very definitely alters their personality. What Vince can afford to do that I can't is test. If I had the money to test, I would test and say, "You can't do it." It would put me out of business to attempt it now. So the other alternative is put myself in the position of guessing and I think that would be unfair. That's one of those areas where I try to stay out of people's lives as much as possible.

Keller: If you believed you were encouraging steroid use by the way you hired or promoted, would you stop doing that?

Jarrett: Absolutely.

Keller: Not everybody would say that.

Jarrett: That's awful. I think it's as dangerous as cocaine. I think it leads to people's deaths.

Keller: Not to mention that it's a felony to use steroids.

Jarrett: Even if it wasn't against the law, from what I know personally, my doctor says that we've just seen the tip of the iceberg. He says in 20 years when they cut all of these NFL linemen open and look at their livers and kidneys, they'll find a kidney that looks 120 years old. It's happening already.

Keller: I guess anybody who is going to like you or provide benefits to you because you are bigger due to steroids is not worth your time.

Jarrett: You're preaching to the choir. I am 5-9 and 200 pounds and I wrestled at this size. Probably before Vince hired The Lightning Kid (6-2, 190), I had the record of pushing the smallest guys that have ever been in the wrestling business. Right now I have PG13, the two of them together almost weigh less than 280. I would be more inclined to say I wish they'd all go away, but I can't say that because in order to stay in business, I have to put out there what will sell tickets. And bigger-than-life people will sell more tickets than Joe on the street.

Keller: I think history has shown that a territory predominantly made up of smaller wrestlers can be successful. But when you match Dundee next to Hogan, then sometimes there is a credibility problem.

Jarrett: One of my most successful runs I had in here was Bill Dundee vs. Sylvester Ritter, before Ritter was "Junkyard Dog."

Keller: How did you originally get involved in

professional wrestling?

Jarrett: Oh, let's see. My mother, Christine Jarrett, worked at—I believe it was Woolworth's—to supplement her income, took a job selling tickets for Nick Gulas and Roy Welch. Me being literally a toddler—I think I was three years old—in those days we were far from affluent, so she'd take me to the matches with her. So I was exposed to everybody. At 6 years old, I started selling programs at the matches. At about 12 years old, I started selling tickets at the door. That was before they had all the laws precluding everything, including child labor laws. From there, I literally grew up in the business. I graduated from high school in '60, went off to college and got disillusioned a couple of times. Believe it or not, I was studying for the ministry. I ended up, after college, going to work for a manufacturing company. I then became disillusioned with the corporate structure. My buddy who was my mentor got turned out to pasture when he was about 58 years old and I was given the job.

Keller: Can you touch on being disillusioned with the ministry?

Jarrett: Yeah. The ministry bit was I was very pure of spirit and very naive to the world. I didn't realize that the guys sitting around the student union building were giving each other tips and ministers were coming in saying, "Brush up on your golf game and be sure to compliment the bishop in the Methodist church. The bishop is like the booker. In the religious world, you can either be given a Methodist circuit where you preach in four or five churches for meals or whatever tokens they want to give you, or you can be assigned to a major church with a car and a parish and a house and an enormous salary. I'm talking about back in the '60s when a salaries of 60 to 80 thousand dollars were the good ones. That was a lot of money back then.

So it was feast or famine as it is in any business, and I just wasn't equipped for that and so one day I was sitting around and I said if this is what it's about, if this is the game then I'm going to just go into the business world. I didn't know all the politics and stuff. The older I got and the farther along I got in classes the more I learned that it was a business, it was a religious business. Just the reality of the world, not that it's good, bad, wrong, it was a disillusionment to a nineteen year old kid.

Keller: How were you disillusioned about the corporate world?

Jarrett: It was again my naivete of not realizing that the corporation has no face, it has no emotion, it has no conscience; it's a sociopath. All corporations are the same. That's not good or bad, that's just the way it is. But my naivete of thinking that you give 30, 40 years of your life to this company and they're not going to look after you when you get 60 years old was disillusioning. If they can replace an executive with a lot of perks with a young kid who has more energy and

is bright and has a future for half of the money, they'd do it. That's life. I understand those things now. At that time, it was very disillusioning.

So I went to Nick Gulas. By this time my mother went from selling tickets just on Tuesday nights at the Hippodrome to selling tickets at her job to being their secretary. Again, growing up at the matches, during the 50's, I would promote spot shows for them in the summer when school was out. So I had a little bit of background and I got disillusioned at Muriel Howe. Just learning what a corporation was, I made the decision that I was going to have to work for myself. So I went to Nick Gulas and Roy Welch and I told them I wanted to work in an area where I could master my own future. I didn't want to have to depend on some president.

What happened at Muriel was that the son came up and took over for his father. His father hired me and that was a man by the name of C.W. Hannon and he was the founder of the company. C.W. and I had great rapport even though there was a lot of age difference. And then his son Bill took over. And Bill simply wanted his own crew there, which you know happens with bookers in the wrestling business. Remember at the time that this is happening to me, I'm very naive to all this. So when Bill, the son, took over as president, he wanted his crew in. He came to me and told me to stay after work and said, "We're very proud of what you've done, you're bright and have a great future here. We want to put you in charge of the purchasing department. It'll be a staff level position." Rather than being elated that I've got this big job, it just crushed me because I sat there and I looked at Walter Banus who was the director and the man who had hired me and brought me along and taught me well. I just said Walter doesn't want to be turned out to pasture until another 5 years and I'm more than content to wait until I'm in my 30s and get the promotion when Walter retires.

So anyway, they told me that they were going to make the change and I could have it or they would get somebody else. So I went over to Walter's house and I told him what had come down and he insisted that I take it. He said, "You're not powerful enough to save me." So I took the job and turned in my resignation at the same time. From there I went into the wrestling business.

Keller: What steps did you take to become part of the wrestling business?

Jarrett: I started by getting out a map. These were the territory days. And the wrestling world was divided up into 22 offices. All of these offices were members of the National Wrestling Alliance. Verne Gagne and Vince McMahon Sr. were ex-officio members. They came to all of our meetings, (but weren't full-fledged members). In the early '50s, the wrestling people signed the consent agreement that said, "We are a monopoly, but we promise not to do it again." As

a result of that, the men thought it was better that Verne—because he was kind of in the Midwest there, he had the AWA and his own champion—and Vince—because he was in the Northeast and had his own champion—be separate. But everybody was still affiliated kind of in a loose association. So, everybody was really careful not to step on each other. So I got a map out and I saw Nick and Roy's areas and the other areas. I saw that Bruiser came down so far south and Nick and Roy went so far North. So there was this dead area including Evansville, Ind., Louisville, Ky., and Lexington, Ky. So I asked them about that, got my own TVs, and started my own little area in affiliation with Nick Gulas and Roy Welch. This was about 1970.

Keller: Did you have any trouble with other promoters saying you were promoting in their territory?

Jarrett: Actually, Dick the Bruiser and Wilbur Snyder showed up at the first Louisville match and said it was their area. We argued back and forth and I said they hadn't run there in a while. I struck a deal with them that night and paid them for years and years five percent of the profits, kind of a user fee for the area. In the progression of time, I picked up a couple of other towns, Tupello, Ms. and Jonesboro, Ar., little satellites out of Memphis.

So then Roy Welch said, "You're doing a good job helping me out. Why don't you take the booking over." So then I started booking Memphis. That was a tremendous assistance to me. Then Roy got—well we didn't know it as such at the time, but he had Alzheimer's Disease—he started forgetting things and losing his memory. His son was Buddy Fuller, who at that time was a power in the business. Nick and I sat down with Buddy. First what happened was Jim Barnett flew down here from Australia and hired me to run Atlanta. He bought Atlanta from Lester Welch. Lester had bought Atlanta from Ann and Ray Gunkel. Ray Gunkel and Buddy Fuller were partners. Ray died. Lester was partners with Eddie Graham in Florida. Buddy and Lester swapped—I guess Buddy felt something for Ray. They ended up swapping, so Buddy went to Florida with Eddie Graham and Lester ran Atlanta. Ann Gunkel decided that she didn't like the way Lester was going to do it, so she decided that she was going to run it. So she went to Ted Turner and got a TV show and Lester had a TV show. So there were two television shows on in Atlanta.

Jim Barnett wanted to come back to the States. He was originally in Ohio. He went to Australia. I think they changed prime ministers and Barnett fell out. I'm not sure of that. Barnett bought the Atlanta territory from Lester Welch and came to Tennessee and hired me. When I had first talked to Jim was after somebody had given him my name as someone who might want to take over Australia. We talked about it back and forth on the phone for a couple of months. My wife didn't

want to go and I didn't really, either. So Jim came here and gave me what at the time in the early-'70s was a lot—500 dollars a day in expenses to book Atlanta for him. The deal I made for him was I could do both.

Keller: How were you able to do both?

Jarrett: I would fly down to Atlanta on Friday or sometimes drive from Nashville. I would do TV. I hired Bobby Shane as my assistant. The Atlanta house ran on Friday. I would fly in, be at the house show on Friday, and we'd stay over and do TV Saturday, then I'd come back in to the Tennessee territory. You can book from wherever you are. I was in contact with Bobby Shane and he would handle Atlanta. Then Jim Barnett came to me and whoever the guy is he ended up selling Australia to needed a booker. I recommended Bobby Shane. You know that story. He went over and did a pretty good job, came back to Florida, and got killed in a plane. I booked Atlanta for a while. When I went to Atlanta, I didn't have any points in the Tennessee territory. That's when Roy started getting forgetful. Nick and Buddy Fuller called and said, "Here's the deal. We'll give you 10 percent, you buy 40 percent." Nick and Roy were 50-50 partners. So it ended up where I had the same percentage as Nick. They gave me part of it and I bought part of it, then we leased 20 per cent from Buddy Fuller. This is about 1974, '75. Whenever Barnett took over, I was there his first couple of years. Bill Watts was booking for Lester, so I went in following Watts.

So I come back here and Nick Gulas and I are partners. I paid Nick 60,000 dollars for an initial payment. A year later there was a 50,000 dollar payment due. Nick Gulas ended up saying, "Don't worry about the payment. We're making more money than we've ever made in our life. I don't feel right having you earn most of the money in Memphis and paying me." The contract said if I defaulted on the payment, I lost all the stock. The payment passed, only I didn't remember the contract. I said, "I've got the money when you want it." He said, "I'll let you know." What it was was it was leverage. Then we had an argument over his son. He wanted him to be featured in what we called the west territory, Memphis, Louisville, Evansville, Lexington, those towns. Nick ran the east end of the territory, which was Nashville, Chattanooga, Huntsville, and Birmingham.

George Gulas, his son, had been featured at his end. I didn't think he was very good. I told him I didn't want him in Memphis and he wasn't going. That was when Nick told me I didn't own anything. So from that point, I went to a lawyer named David Caywood in Memphis and he said, "Well, here are your alternatives. You can fight the lawsuit and probably have Nick's lawyer disbarred and get control of the business. The downside is you're talking about two to three years before it would be resolved by the courts and you are talking about a lot of money. Then when it gets resolved, there's a question of

whether Nick would still be your partner even though you would gain control over it." I said, "That's not a very good alternative. What's the other one?" He said, "Well, the other alternative is to write him a letter, relinquish any ownership in the company, resign as any officer that you may or may not be, then go get TVs and start your own territory." So I chose that option.

Keller: Was Jerry Lawler a key player during this?

Jarrett: Yes, at this point Lawler was on my end, not Nick's end.

Keller: Where was Lance Russell?

Jarrett: Lance was the TV announcer. His job was program director for Channel 13. So, at that point I went off and did my own thing. I went out to Las Vegas and pleaded my case, Nick pleaded his case, and the National Wrestling Alliance decided that Nick was not telling the truth and they supported me. Remember, we had an east end and west end. All the wrestlers who were in the area, they stayed with me with the exception of my two best friends, Tojo Yamamoto and Jackie Fargo. The whys and wherefores I don't know. I was friends with Tojo when he died and I'm still very good friends with Jackie Fargo. They knew that I could book, they knew I could work and draw money. They didn't think I had the financial position to run a wrestling company. Of course, Eddie Graham was my real mentor in this business and I knew I could count on him if I got in a bind.

Strange as it may seem, Buddy Fuller was a really wealthy man at that time, worth about 19 million dollars. I knew I could count on him. So, I didn't talk these things out openly. Then I started in business. Lance Russell said, "Well, Jerry, I'll go with you." Then Nick and his partner showed up with lawyers down at Channel 13 in Memphis. They (told Lance) if he went, they'd sue us. They said, "We're the old company." The TV station made the decision to just drop wrestling. So then I went to visit Channel 5 and said it would be wonderful if they had wrestling and they would have great ratings. I told him I could bring him the program director from Channel 13, which at the time was the number one station in the market, plus the weather man, Dave Brown, who was the number one news personality in the market. He said, "If you can do those things, we'll put you on the air." So I had to work out a deal with Lance, which was really hard because Lance was changing professions. Fortunately for me, at those times, the program director's salary wasn't very much, so I was able to give him a salary about double what he was making. Lance went with me and Dave made a good deal for himself and a good deal for me. I also paid Dave to do the announcing. So I made the coup and Channel 5 went from number three in the market to number one and it's been a wonderful relationship throughout the rest of the years. Now, Lance thought bigger was better, so he went to work for Turner.

Keller: Was there ever a time in the early '80s when Lance Russell and Jerry Lawler got together to split off from you and work on their own promotion?

Jarrett: Yes. That was a situation where I had made commitments to Lawler from day one when I went in business. I told him, "Jerry, right now, there is nothing. And you don't have any money to gamble. I don't either, but if we run on hard times, I've got two buddies who will give me the money. After we get up and running and successful, I'll cut you in for five percent of everything, the whole territory. Then we experienced quite a run and were very successful. As strange as this sounds, I just forgot about it, literally forgot I had made the promise. Jerry was getting money for booking, profit out of Memphis, and back then we were romping and stomping. He was earning 1,800 or 2,000 dollars a week for wrestling. Jerry, the personality that Jerry is, I know it's hard for an outsider to fathom, but he never came to me and said, "Hey Jerry, remember what you promised." So, that was the background of it. Then I had a guy in, Bill Dundee, who I made assistant booker for a while. Dundee and Lawler have had a professional jealousy since day one. I'm out of town one week and Dundee and Lawler get into it and Dundee goes over and tells him, "If you don't get in line, I'll just have to fire you. Well, when I got back, Lawler said, "How much clout does Dundee have?" I said, "Well, you know, he's my assistant." I didn't know how serious it had become. He said, "Well, okay, I just didn't know." At that point Lawler thinks, "Well, I had better do my own thing."

So he started planning to open up himself. With Lance, well—the problem with Jerry is my fault. The problem with Lance, well, I have serious feelings about it even to this day because he was taking my check every week and planning to run against me. In business, to me anything goes. But this gets to a morality issue. If he had said, "Don't pay me anymore, I'm going to put you out of business," then I would have thought, what a spunky guy. But if a man is on my payroll and taking my checks and trying to undermine me, that is a problem. That morning at TV when Jerry told me, "I want to tell you Lance and I are going to try to do our own thing," he and I went in back and I asked him what brought this on. He did and I said, "Well, that's no problem. We'll go back through the record books and I'll recoup it all. All I can tell you is the truth, I never thought about it anymore. Why didn't you say something to me?" He said, "Well, I felt kind of funny about it." I said, "Well, don't you feel you're partly responsible for not saying something to me about it?" He said, "Yeah, probably." I said, "Well, then all we got to do is go back and pay you every dime you've got coming. I'll do that whether you go or not. I owe you that. I made that commitment. There's no question, I owe you that." So he said, "Now you make me feel like an idiot. Let's just forget about it and go on down the

road. He said, "Let's forget about it. We work too good together as a team. I should have said something about it to you rather than just being a big baby feeling sorry for myself. Hell, I screwed up." Then he asked me, "Hell, I know Lance doesn't have any basis other than greed, but it would make me feel better if you didn't hold it against him." I said, "I can't say I will forget it, but I will let it ride." So I let it ride.

Keller: What is the current status of USWA ownership?

Jarrett: The current status is that Jerry Lawler and I are 50-50. We made tremendous money through 1985. Then in 1986 and 1987 we had a serious decline. That's when all of the offices closed up. So at that point, I went to Jerry and said, "I don't know where we're going to go, but I can no longer fund 90 percent of these losses. We have picked up some deals and we're 50-50 on some things, yet the actual promotion part of it is 90 percent. I either have to bring in a partner for 40 percent of this or you can take this position." He took it and he and we have struggled together from 1987 through today. Through all of these different things, from day one I had given my mother 25 percent of Louisville Wrestling Enterprises. She retired and we transferred that back into the pot and Jerry and I just split that up. She retired two or three years ago.

Keller: What are your long-term goals?

Jarrett: I would like to be instrumental in assisting in devising a plan in which our business could rebuild itself. Right now we have a business that is a mule, and as you know, mules can't procreate. With the WWF and WCW and USWA and Smoky Mountain, with those companies, it is absolutely and totally impossible to create new talent that is necessary for us to have the run that we had in the '80s. Totally impossible. If somebody who has more wherewithal than I do doesn't come to this realization, this business is extinct. I screamed as loud as I could to the Turner folks going back to the early days of Jim Herd that they would be right here where they are today if they didn't do something about it. I wrote them a long program detailing a five region system. I guess it set in somebody's file cabinet, it didn't get thrown into the trash right away. Jim Barnett had the idea to be national before Vince did it. I told Jim then, "The success of your effort is your death notice. If you take over the country, where are you going to get the next generation of wrestlers?" I said, "Here's how it's working now. You have 22 offices and if each office averages producing two pieces of talent a year, you'd have 44 potential stars." Now, in our industry, 44 seasoned stars will sell tickets, 44 wrestlers will supplement the business. Now, Wade, from June 2, 1992 to June 2, 1993, how many new wrestlers has this business produced? It's certainly not 44. In this area, historically we produce four or five a year. When I count them nationwide, right now if I had to say who are two undiscovered pieces of

talent across the country, I would say it's Jeff Jarrett and Brian Christopher. Where are the others?

Keller: If you looked hard enough, you could find more names, such as The Nightstalker and Chris Candido in Smoky Mountain and Lightning Kid out of the PWA who became "future stars" over the last year.

Jarrett: So without thinking harder, we could only come up with five who have become notable this year. Here's how it will really get the point across from what I'm saying. Let's make it a given that all five of those are going to be great box office stars as are Sting and Savage. That's not counting the level of their proficiency in the ring, rather just being able to sell tickets. Now that's five that you and I together can think of. Now tell me in order for WCW to be able to have a show that is going to have a four rating, how many pieces of new talent do they need right now. Ten? New York is not in the shape Turner's in, but how many pieces of new talent do they need? Not recycled talent, but new talent? They could use seven or eight or ten. And I need five and Jim Cornette could use five. So there's four offices left and between us we need 30 pieces of talent and you and I together can come up with five. What's gonna happen next year?

Keller: So then let's wrap this back to the original question: What are your goals in wrestling?

Jarrett: I'm 50 years old. In the next ten, maybe I'll stay healthy and I've got 15 years in the business—in those 15 years I'd like to be able to tell my sons Jason and Jeff—after I go park it in Florida and fish—that pro wrestling is at a point where it can procreate. Right now, I can't tell them that. Right now, I'm telling Jason, "I want you to take the toughest courses you can at Brentwood Academy and I want you to prepare yourself for a career other than wrestling." When I first proposed my idea, the big promotions could have subsidized a territory for 30 to 50 thousand dollars a year and keep it in business. The level of the business now is that it would take a commitment from either Vince or Turner of I think a million dollars a year and they would have to subsidize each territory 200 thousand dollars a year to keep it in business.

Keller: Would the plan be for the territories to become self-sustaining soon?

Jarrett: Oh yeah, but the big promotion would have to be willing to commit to that. You'd have to commit the million dollars and pick the right people. They'd say, "We're going to start this thing and we expect you to use 50 thousand dollars in the first three months. Then we're expecting you to not need to use 40 thousand in the next three months and then maybe 20 or 30 thousand in the next three months and then maybe by the second year, it would drop down to 10 thousand or a break—even point." Then somebody tracks them, comes to see what they're

doing, how they're handling their TV. And if they're not doing it right, you can change horses right there. If you had five territories and then New York and Turner and me and Cornette, all of a sudden you have nine offices, and if the five territories made a concerted effort to produce four or five pieces of talent, then you've got 25 new wrestlers a year.

Keller: When you mention you, Cornette, Turner and Vince, do you see Turner and Vince scaling back to more of a territory, or do you see them continuing to run in Memphis every once in a while because they remain truly national? Or is part of the qualification of having five added territories that the two national promotions scale back and still have national TV, but run shows only in their part of the country?

Jarrett: It doesn't hurt you. That's what I told them. As a matter of fact, they would draw better. Let's say you set up a territory in Florida and Vince also wants to come to Florida. How often does he go there? Once every two or three months? When he goes there, remember the territory is running Tampa 52 weeks a year like Eddie Graham did. So now they come six times a year. So your territory runs 48 times a year and the four or six times a year the WWF comes, you don't run that week. He devotes his TV to it. And you take three of the top matches in the territory and stick them on a WWF card.

Keller: Is the idea that there are the hardcore followers who will attend the territory every week and a few thousand more who will go four or six times a year to see the national stars?

Jarrett: And then your local stars look like bigger stars because they are on the card with the big boys. They have their feature match and then the territory continues on with the programs and the weekly cards.

Keller: With the plan that you have in your mind, is it necessary for the territories to cooperate, or is it necessary for the WWF and WCW to cooperate?

Jarrett: You will never again have a "national wrestling alliance." You just don't have the character of people that it took. The world has changed. Those were days when you picked up the telephone, if a guy said he was going to do something, you could bank on it. Those days are gone forever in every kind of business. I was a principle in a bank around here and I found out that the world's changed in the banking industry, too. People have changed. Now you need 14 pages of contracts and whoever has the sharpest lawyers with the loopholes has the enforceable contract. The NWA can never again be. What's going to have to happen is the major company that sets up the system is going to have to dot all of the I's and cross all of the T's. There is a kid that I've got coming up here and all I'm going by is a videotape that I saw on him and Eddie Marlin saying he seemed like a nice kid with his head

screwed on straight. His name is Bo Alexander. He's coming up from Atlanta, I think, where he worked independents. I've got another kid here who I think has potential. His name is Mark Frear. Right now, let's hypothetically assume that this territory system is in place and we're one of the territories. I could go to Mark Frear or Bo Alexander or anybody else that's here and say, Here's a contract and you are a USWA talent, which for the sake of argument is a subsidiary of the WWF, and you have got to commit to the USWA for five years. What we're going to do is give you a base of 300 dollars a week against whatever you draw at the house. You're 300 dollars is a minimum. You acknowledge beforehand the right for the USWA to transfer you at a time that your work level indicates it to the WWF and at that time you would be an agent to negotiate whatever deal you can with the parent company, the WWF. But, if you fail to reach a negotiation with them, you come back to the USWA and you aren't a free agent to go anywhere until five years from now. How many people would not sign it?

Keller: A lot of people probably would if that was an established route to enter the business.

Jarrett: It's a hell of a deal for them. Nobody knows you and you can't get yourself booked. Japan won't even return your telephone calls. Now after we put our expertise and training and exposure on television in our area and the magazines get a hold of you and the fans write letters about you, then all of a sudden, you've become a marketable product.

Keller: What do you tell young wrestlers or prospective wrestlers when they come into your territory? You can't make them those types of promises, can you?

Jarrett: No. And I don't. What I tell them is this is the greatest opportunity in the world for a young man who wants to make a career in the wrestling business because never before and never again will there be such a shortage of talent. Now, how do you get the money—men in this business to notice you? Well, if you get over in Tennessee and you draw us money here, they will beat the door down for you. Also, because of our talent exchange deal with Vince, you will have the opportunity to be exposed to Randy Savage, Lex Luger, Papa Shango, all the WWF talent who will go back and talk about you to people in New York. Your visibility is more. You can languish in the obscurity of the independents and continue to get 15 matches a year or you can come here and work every night and have a chance to improve yourself where you have a shot at the big time.

Keller: You talked about how you would like to guarantee 300 dollars a week...

Jarrett: I just threw that out as a figure. I don't have any idea. That's what was in my proposal to Jack Petrik with WCW.

Keller: What right now are you able to offer new talent who you think have potential but won't be able to draw you money right away? What is your base salary, if any?

Jarrett: We don't have any. We are still in the '50s as far as how the business was pre-WWF and WCW. Whatever the house draws, you divide it up among the boys and the main event gets the biggest share and the opening match gets the least share. That's the way the wrestling business has always been and that's the way it is now with everybody except Turner. That's the way it is with Vince McMahon.

Keller: If a guy comes into your territory and he is low on your cards, does he have to find full-time work in addition to his full-time wrestling schedule?

Jarrett: It depends on how we're drawing at the time. January, February, and March, it was sustainable. The last couple months, it wasn't. The only thing they know they are going to get is a 40 dollar advance at the town that night which will make sure they can eat and get gas for their car to get home. We don't even call that minimum; we call that a gas allowance.

Keller: What is your opinion of wrestlers earning guaranteed money versus being paid based on the house?

Jerry Jarrett: We cut out guarantees years ago. They're self-defeating. You kill the guy's work ethic. Ten years ago we had a minimum guarantee of \$50 or \$100, you were on one of the two. What would happen is the promoter would get over in Columbus, Ms. and he would say, "I lost \$800 the last time I ran this show and I paid everybody \$80 and \$100. The payoffs today should be \$70 and \$140, but I'm just gonna say \$50 and \$100 because I've got to recoup the \$800 from the last show." So the guarantees became offsetting. That's terrible. Remember, I spent 15 years as a wrestler running up and down the roads and I'd have a hat on as a promoter for my towns and I worked for promoters in other towns.

I remember, I worked the HIC Pavilion in Hawaii and I knew I didn't have a whole lot to do with it, but when I talked to a promoter over there—Lord Blears—he said, "Jerry, we've got a minimum guarantee of \$75." I said that wasn't a problem because I wanted work over there. Tojo (Yamamoto), that's where he started, so he wanted to go. So we went over and worked. They were hanging from the rafters, it was packed. I got my check and it said \$75. I made a little mental note then, "If I'm ever in this, I'm not going to do that." On the other hand, we've gone to towns with Jackie Fargo and The Interns and other top names and we didn't draw. We would sit in the dressing room and talk about how embarrassed we were. Then the promoter would come in and we'd tell the promoter to give us 10 dollars a piece for our gas to get back home. Then, times were different. Today, you show me a wrestler who says, "I didn't draw nothing, so don't pay me nothing."

Keller: Do you think the odds are the business will be in better shape in five years than it is today?

Jarrett: There's one thing wrong with the way the business is today, and that is a lack of new, exciting talent. If somebody would go and open up a can and get a Hulk Hogan, Randy Savage, Sting, Ultimate Warrior, Iron Sheik, Plowboy Frasier and congregate that talent that had worked every night in a territory and had the experience and knew how to make interviews and knew the difference between wrestling and drawing money, if somebody could get a crew of 12 fresh new people, that company would thrive instantly.

Keller: Nationally or regionally?

Jarrett: Either way. Instantly. There is one problem with the wrestling business today. That is you cycle and recycle all you want to, and it's still gonna shape up as being the exact same talent. Remember the TV show "All in the Family?" That show ran its course. It went from great popularity to mediocre popularity. Then all of the stars said, "I'm going to go out and have my own television show." And they all failed. Then O'Connor got "In the Heat of the Night" and was able to revive himself in a totally different character. Some of the talent that has gotten stale and old could probably go do a sitcom and do very well because they'd be in a very different environment. When you take wrestlers and repackage them from one national company to another, and their candle has burned out, it's hopeless. Even Johnny Carson got old. That was the most popular television show of all time. He got old. I hate to face the fact that I've gotten old.

Keller: How is wrestling's formula for success different than it was 20 years ago? There obviously have been changes in the way to be successful. Those who don't think so could fairly be considered out of touch.

Jarrett: The success formula for a regional basis is tremendously more difficult. I spend more time on a Memphis TV today preparing for Saturday than when I drew 18,000 dollars. We drew 18,000 dollars for seven years on average every Monday night in Memphis. I'd lay out TV in the car with my briefcase on my lap driving to Louisville on Tuesday. Today you do tremendous amounts of post-production. We tape at the matches and before I talked to you, I pulled all the film from the Mid-South Coliseum and pulled the highlights that I think will help us draw money and cut out the ones I thought would hurt us. I put together some videos and pulled Undertaker film out and repackaged it because last time he was here we were trying to sell Undertaker against Giant Gonzales and now we're trying to sell Undertaker vs. Brian Christopher. We reworked that. In the past, I didn't have to do very much to tell them that Jerry Jarrett was just about the hottest star in the country. Our TV was all they saw. If I just looked

better than the rest of the guys on the TV show, I was the hottest property. Today, they can watch hours of cable wrestling, four or five hours of WWF, and that sh-- from Texas on ESPN. Then there's some guy with a talk show in this area, it's horrendous.

What you have to do is go back to the very basics. If two cars stop at the intersection and two guys get out and start fighting, all of the people will stop and tie up traffic for three miles to watch the fight. That's instinctive, so you have to remember that. We've got to have two guys and transfer that to wrestling like they stopped off the interstate to have a fight.

On a national basis, I have some theories, but I don't want to second guess WCW and Titan on the record. I have some very definite ideas on how they ought to be done. I have a relationship with the WWF, so by letter or by phone, I express my opinions and they take it for just that—free advice. I don't have any relationship with Turner so I don't express my opinions there.

I can tell you this, on a national level, there is no difference today from the heyday. There is no more competition from what they had back then. All they have to do is what they did then, and they'll experience another heyday. Everybody I know that had ownership made a million dollars from 1982 to 1985. I mean everybody. We sat down here in Tennessee and made well over a million dollars in profit during those years. New York and Crockett were in business then. So, the one thing that is different is the two majors could go around the country and pluck seasoned box office talent. Their hat trick is getting new talent today.

Keller: Is there a difference between wrestling in the ring today than in 1983 or earlier? Is today's wrestling a little faster paced and less realistic?

Jarrett: Let me tell you a story. I told you about the relationship I had with Eddie Graham. We were very close. In 1978, Eddie Graham had a plane and he called me and said, "Jerry, I want to pick you up in Nashville and I'll take you to Memphis with me." I said okay. On the way down, he said, "I wanted to get you way up here so that you'd know I wasn't telling anyone else this and I just wanted you to know it. You are killing the wrestling business." I said, "What do you mean?" He said, "All this sh— you're doing in Memphis, chain matches, scaffold matches, coal miners glove matches, you've just carried it too far." I said, "Well, I'm making a lot of money, Eddie. And I don't think so. I think a good movie is a good movie. Whatever I see in this movie, the more adventure or the more action, it won't preclude me from coming back. I can tell you that. Nick Gulas and Roy Welch are absolutely up sh—'s creek if they try to get another booker to follow me. I think I can follow myself."

The reason I tell you that story is that was 1978. So, I hear the same doomsday people

saying, "Holy cow, they've done everything that can be done." They haven't. The singers change, but the songs don't. Here in country music we have a saying that the song sells, as in, it's not the singer of the song, the song sells. I can't carry a tune in the shower, and I don't know what your musical talents are, but if you had sung "Achy Breaky Heart," you'd have been a hit. In the wrestling business, it's the song that sells, not the singer.

Keller: What about wrestlers who are doing things that just weren't done 10 or 20 years ago, such as Jushin Liger or Cactus Jack? The argument there is if the style isn't credible, people won't stop their cars on the freeway to watch a fake fight. Where do you find the balance between credibility and outrageousness?

Jarrett: I sat in on a National Wrestling Alliance meeting as a kid, literally a kid, and heard this same thing discussed with Argentina Rocca. They said, "He's killing the business with all of that aerial sh—." I'm telling you, the wrestling business doesn't change. Everything is relative to its day and Argentina Rocca set the wrestling world on its ear because he was such an aerial artist.

Keller: A lot of veterans of this business would disagree with your philosophy: Let the wrestlers do what they're capable of doing.

Jarrett: Sure, hell, you think we need to still go back and have a 16 foot pole vault record? I listen to ESPN and I get a kick out of them arguing about whether Muhammed Ali could beat Joe Louis. Well, Joe Louis told me riding to a card in Memphis to referee our matches, me being a stupid mark asking, "Who would've won that fight, Joe?" He told me, "In track, every year records are broken. In baseball, every year, records are broken. Any sport that is able to be measured, every year the athletes are better. Muhammed Ali would have knocked me out in the first round. You'll get the old-timers who will argue you blue in the face, but, Jerry, every year the athletes are better than the previous year."

When you think about that—"Anytime there is a sport that can be measured"—you can put a tape measure to the javelin and the discus, you can put a stopwatch to the runner, everything that can be measured the athletes are better today than they've ever been. So why do we want to ground the wrestlers and say, "That's too many dropkicks?" (laughs)

Keller: Many have argued to the contrary, saying if you do too many dropkicks, too much off the top rope, if you take too many outrageous bumps, then pretty soon the realism or the fans' ability to suspend disbelief disappears.

Jarrett: Ah, now you're getting into technique. The difference between me and some other booker is I tell the guy, "If you can do a triple somersault and land on that guy, great." The key

concern is then doing moves in a way that makes sense to all kinds of fans, where they don't question the authenticity, including the aftermath of the move. If the triple somersault actually hurts the wrestler more than a single somersault—if that's what appears to be the case—then it doesn't hurt credibility to execute moves like that.

I really care about the business. I want my children to continue in the business. Everybody who will listen to me, I try to tell them what I think we ought to be doing. All of a sudden I look around and I see myself as the senior statesman in the business. Isn't that a shame? I had the good fortune to have as my peers, Jim Crockett Sr., Vince McMahon Sr., Sam Mushnick, Mike LaBell, Roy Shires, Don Owens, Leroy McGuirk. I remember when Bill Watts was just getting started.

I've seen a lot of transformation and I don't think it's necessarily bad. I think one of the two companies some day will say they've got to set up five regional territories. I think they'll be forced to do that.

Keller: Do you think WCW has a chance to improve its financial standing by becoming strictly a television promotion and eliminating all house shows?

Jarrett: It won't work. The wrestling business is a unique business. Kids who watch cartoons, for instance, know it's fantasy. Kids and adults watch wrestling and because we play in the arenas, they can see these little figures come out of their TV sets and see that they're real. When you can't do that, it goes back into the realm of fantasy.

Keller: Do you think if people aren't attending arena events, just the knowledge that arena events are taking place is important to television ratings?

Jarrett: I don't believe the ratings, personally. I live by them, like everybody else because it's the Bible of television, but remember, Nielson lives off of subscribers and gets six to eight thousand dollars a month. If we got a report back that said no one was watching, do you think we would have paid them next month and the month after? I have charted the ratings and during the February sweeps after our best show rating-wise on television, we drew the worst house the following Monday night. After our worst rated TV show, we had the best house at the Coliseum. I'm talking about a 100 percent increase in the gate.

Keller: Was there a distinctive, noticeable difference in the line-up or quality of angles that would account for that?

Jarrett: No, you know, we have the same crew. When we drew the least money, we had the best ratings. That's not to say that's impossible, but I'm talking about charting this for 20 years. I find no correlation between ratings and what we draw at the house. That leaves me to believe there

should be a correlation and therefore possibly the Nielson ratings are wrong. It's a big deep dark secret how they come up with the numbers. They won't tell anybody. I just know this, I believe a test pattern would get a 1.2 rating.

Keller: What are your thoughts on Eddie Gilbert?

Jerry Jarrett: I can tell you that potentially Eddie is one of the great talents in this business. I would prefer to leave it at that.

Keller: How about Hulk Hogan?

Jarrett: Hogan was a great, charismatic talent who happened to be at the right place at the right time. Personally, I wouldn't want to go to dinner with him.

Keller: Why not?

Jarrett: He has forgotten where he came from. He forgot it with me and he's forgotten it with Vince.

Keller: What about what he said on the Nashville Network about a Nashville promoter who still owed him money?

Jarrett: I have no idea why, other than he doesn't want to remember when he couldn't walk and chew bubble gum. He doesn't want to remember that I went down and helped him get his Lincoln when he came in here walking and that he ran out on them and they had to chase him down. I just guess that he just doesn't want to remember those things. You heard what he said. Here's where he started. He would have never been in the wrestling business if we never booked him. What could we owe him? Isn't that what you thought? Look what Vince McMahon has done for that guy and look at how he (Hogan) talks about him and the WWF Title. He is a great talent that was charismatic and at the right place at the right time. But I wouldn't want to go to lunch with him.

Keller: What about Verne Gagne?

Jarrett: Verne was a terrific wrestler in his day. He didn't do well in a competitive environment (as a promoter). He was a big territory when he was the only man in town. A lot of people get caught up with who they are. The saddest thing in the world that we as a society do is the way we treat our ex-presidents. Well, you've been the most powerful person in the world, but now your time has passed, so you're not s---. True, you might make us a good secretary of state, but look at how demeaning that would be to your position. So the best thing for me to do is really demean you and have you go out and play golf or write your memoirs and say this is a complete has-been that we've sent out to pasture.

I used to sit down in Las Vegas and be in awe of all of these multi-millionaires walking around. Everybody there was a super-rich guy. These were in the days I was trying to get money. I would think, "The men in this room could buy this hotel with what they spend in transportation

every year." I was just totally in awe of it. Then one day I woke up and heard about (them losing all of their money).

Keller: What are the keys to you not becoming one of those bankrupt former millionaires?

Jarrett: In our office, at one time I had a \$50,000 a week payroll in here. That's wrestlers and staff. Then I had to come through and did what I called a company reorganization. I cut my payroll down to about \$35,000 a week. Some of it was talent and others in staff. At that time, I had a nice office building on the highway in town and secretaries and thousand dollar a week announcers—two of them. I owned half interest in an airplane. When I was tired, I would just go in the plane and go to Memphis or Louisville.

I went from that to today. I am booker, bookkeeper, I have a house with a wing of it being our office and production facilities and stuff, my television man, Randy, has his equipment now in his house. We have cut back to the bare bones. Then, when we ride this out and the resurgence comes back, then we will go back and expand.

I'm thinking part of the reason all of these people went away is that it was really hard for these rich, powerful men to say, "I'm a little farm club ballclub. I used to be in the major leagues, but now I'm really a farm club system. I can't possibly compete with Turner and New York." I didn't have any trouble with that. I said, "Hell, look how far I am from where I came from." I'm glad I can keep my kids in school and I'm fighting like hell to keep my home in Florida. I'll get by fine if I have to sell those things because I came from a home with no car in the family, so wherever I am with business being bad is so far from there that I would still be considered ultra rich. I have no trouble being a farm club system for somebody else. Those things don't grate me the wrong way. I think possibly—I don't know for sure—I haven't talked to Verne, but possibly he didn't like to perceive himself as a B-team to Vince McMahon.

Keller: What about Fritz Von Erich.

Jarrett: A complete idiot! It is a parent's responsibility to instill reality into your family. When a person makes a deliberate attempt to instill fantasy into your children, that makes you an idiot. When a guy named Jerry Jarrett comes from Tennessee to Dallas, Texas because he was called to buy into Fritz's business, looks at it and sees that it's \$150,000 in debt and the guy who's running the syndication has written you a letter saying you're out of the syndication business—and that same guy comes up there and pumps 60,000 into the syndication business to keep it alive and 100,000 into the wrestling business to pay off the bills and turns the business around in three months and starts giving the two boys checks averaging 10,000 a month and when they don't want to make the shots, he tells them,

"Well, just stay home, boys, and you'll get your \$10,000 every month," and that man tells them, "You don't need this guy from Tennessee running your business. Run it yourself,"—that is an idiot.

Keller: Did you deal much with Max Andrews?

Jarrett: Yeah, he was the guy in the syndication business. I worked with him every day. Max's problem was he thought the television business was the garden and I tried for two years to tell him that television was the flower that grew in the wrestling garden. He never grasped this concept. Therefore, he made some terrible decisions with (Joe) Pedicino. All of a sudden, his garden died and he found out those flowers died along with it. Max's situation is that he never liked wrestling, he never made any attempt to understand it, and so therefore his whole frame of reference was helter-skelter. If you don't understand the wrestling business, you don't understand that television is an ancillary by-product of wrestling. That's something I hope everybody who's in the wrestling business that doesn't seem to understand will understand.

Turner has this insane concept that I've heard bantered about that they're just going to be in the television business. Well, I would suggest they call Max Andrews about just being in the television wrestling business and not in the wrestling business because if they attempt that, they will die the same death Max died.

Keller: What are the pitfalls of being strictly in the wrestling business?

Jarrett: You don't have any garden.

Keller: Draw that out in a more concrete way.

Jarrett: Well, the wrestling business is having wrestlers going on television and saying, "I'm going to beat up this guy and I don't like him," or "He has my belt," or "He's a bad guy," or whatever the scenario. On television, you tell them about the match at the arena. Then you go down to the arena and have the fight. That's the wrestling business in a nutshell.

Now, when you have a wrestling match, you can make a television show out of the advertisement and then you can make a pay-per-view or TBS special out of the house show. That is what I call an ancillary revenue stream you can get out of the wrestling business. Now sometimes that extra perk can far exceed the wrestling business. Vince McMahon has shown us that. Another ancillary to the wrestling business is marketing. Vince has shown us he can make more money than the wrestling. But you never can forget that the garden that these big beautiful flowers are growing out of is the basic meat and potato wrestling business.

Keller: Why does part of the meat and potatoes have to include losing money at arenas if you can't or don't know how to make

money at the arenas?

Jarrett: That's like asking me, "Why in the world do you have to get out here and sucker this tobacco when all I want to do is smoke it?" So why can't I keep out of the hot sun in July and August when I'm trying to go out there and cut all the blooms off the top? It's a hot, killin', back-breaking job so that I end up with enough tobacco base to make \$20,000 a year. You have to do it by hand and plant the plant. I said I won't ever be here again if I have to be in a soup line. If you don't have the wrestling business and it's your responsibility to make it make money, you can make it make money. Just because the organization has been a failure at it, for 2,000 years people have been successful at it. The Greeks were successful at it at the coliseums. You think they didn't pay those guys to get in there and wrestle each other. Sure they did. That was professional wrestling. They paid them with nice living quarters and all the girls they wanted.

If you don't have the wrestling business, that's like saying, "I'm going to just have this tobacco and I'm just going to go to the barn when it's hanging up there and nice dried leaves and I'm gonna roll me a cigarette and smoke it." You've gotta plow the ground, set out the plants, fertilize it, pray that it rains on it, sucker it, chop it, and hang it in the barn. All those are distasteful bad things. Once you do that, you can reap the benefits.

Sure, you don't think I'd like to just produce Saturday wrestling on TV and make a lot of money for it? And not go to Evansville, Ind? You can't be in the wrestling business and not be in the wrestling business.

Keller: Still, though, why is it impossible to make money promoting pay-per-views and television shows alone if those are the only aspects of the business currently making money and, if it's not, why should they continue to lose money at arenas?

Jarrett: Because they're not in the wrestling business. It's bad enough now to try to find a wrestler. Now, all of a sudden, you're going to find wrestlers to perform at maximum level on TV for them to make their TV show and they're not going to be at any venues, they're not going to be in any towns working, and they're not going to know anything about crowd psychology. Now you can't just hear them cheer and boo at home, but they're doing it. If you haven't had any experience in an arena, how are you going to know fan reactions from a TV studio? Are they going to go to Hollywood and get actors instead of wrestlers. Why couldn't Max Andrews keep his syndicated network going after I pulled out?

Keller: I'm sure TBS would argue they have more resources and are willing to hire people who know wrestling. What I'm saying is you could probably argue that Max wasn't the most qualified person to try a new direction with wrestling.

Jarrett: Let me tell you something. I would

challenge anybody at TBS to do what Max Andrews did with that syndication. He took all of the leftover crumbs and when I was out there, we were having four, five, and six ratings when TBS was having sixes and sevens. We were neck and neck with them. Now I'd like to see them get the five and six with our station list that Max put together. It was just that Max didn't understand why he was getting the five or a six. It was his wrestling product. I don't think you can have an NFL football league that just performs for television. The whole idea of television when it was first created, there weren't movies to put on TV. Television was a vehicle to allow us to look in on an event, a variety show or a comedy show. We were looking in on it. Now television has changed. We have movies that were made for TV.

I don't believe—and maybe this is just the old time 50 year old Jerry Jarrett talking—but I honest to goodness do not believe you can have a wrestling business without being in the wrestling business. I don't think you can create talent. I guess you can create talent by going to Hollywood to get stunt men who rehearse and put on a wrestling match. But that's not the wrestling that captures the unique hold that wrestling has had throughout all the years, to have people come and watch it.

If they do that, I think they'll die. Then it will be up to Vince. And if he doesn't set up a system of territories, I think eventually things don't look good for him either, just because talent will go away. Then local guys will come up and have a local television show and the people will start watching it.

I promote wrestling in Memphis. So why is it with my less-talented talent roster, I've drawn 10, 12 and 14 ratings and WCW isn't on. They went down, down, down and took it off?

Keller: It's a hometown product with tradition.

Jarrett: It's because people are watching the wrestling business, not a wrestling show. With the Turner thing, they've already let it go down to being a wrestling show, a purely entertainment thing. My ratings in Louisville are better than WCW's. I certainly don't have better talent. I've got a \$15,000 camera. TBS has \$150,000 cameras. Technically, I'm not better. People watch my program and say, "This is the wrestling business." That's just my opinion. Maybe I'm wrong.

Keller: What do you think of Joe Pedicino?

Jarrett: What can you say about dear old Joe? He paid dearly for his 15 minutes of glory. He tried. Give him an A for effort. He talked Max into sacrificing his business. Max didn't know it at the time. They all threw in together. He was the talk of the wrestling business for a while. And then, the time ran out on his 15 minutes.

Keller: What about his claim in November 1990 that he had purchased the USWA and the

USWA was now one of five territories that would be part of the Global Wrestling Federation?

Jarrett: They conned me. I thought Olu had more money than Fort Knox. I had set my price and they signed contracts and said they were going to purchase it. I said okay, go for it. And it turned out Olu was a figment of somebody's imagination. A human being existed, but who he was and what his name was is anyone's guess. All we know is thank goodness, after I had made a fool of myself, I took my lawyers to the supposed closing and they took me off into another room and said, "This guy's as bogus as a three dollar bill." Olu carried me and my lawyers to a building in Downtown Atlanta and toured us through it, showing us the building he had bought that was going to headquarter Global Wrestling (laughs). This is funny. They went to enormous lengths.

Keller: Was Joe being conned or was Joe part of the con?

Jarrett: I have no idea.

Keller: What would Joe's motivation have been to be part of the con?

Jarrett: To get his 15 minutes of glory. That old saying. I can tell you what 35 years in this business has told me. People will absolutely go to enormous lengths to have their 15 minutes in the spotlight.

Keller: Have you as a promoter ever been unfair to a wrestler for what you perceived as a good or bad reason?

Jarrett: Never. Not in 35 years. Absolutely never. What you have to think of is that by the very nature of the operation there is tremendous room for second guessing. There are 18 people in the house. We go to Memphis and draw \$6,000, which is a \$1,000 loser. And I cannot get one wrestler to ever say, "Well, I guess I didn't draw my fair share. I'm sure if you would have done this on television or if you had cast me in this light or put me in this situation, we would have drawn more. You are at fault." I have never been at a sellout in Memphis where we had 11,400 fans and from the second match up every wrestler didn't say, "Boy, our deal got over on television, didn't it." They all say they drew the house. Now this just goes with the territory.

I'm sure that at the big boom of Wrestlemanias everybody there thought they drew it. And I'm sure today if you go up there where Vince has had some absolute bums where my guess is he's lost \$30-40,000, I'm sure that if you went and talked to any wrestler, they'd say the TV was the problem or the guy they have putting out the publicity ought to be fired. I'm a hero when it draws and I'm the goat when it doesn't. That's just part of the business. I knew that going in as a promoter.

Keller: Are you concerned about the future of the wrestling business?

Vince McMahon is the boldest promoter that I have ever heard about or read about. Anybody who gambled to the extent that he did deserves what happened because he absolutely risked it all. For that I admire him.

Jarrett: I'm hoping that somebody in WCW or the WWF reads this and it has impact. I am really concerned about the business two, three, five years down the road. They're the only ones who can do anything. The natural rebirth—if they finally run out of talent and close the doors—then you're talking about a ten year emergence. The little indies don't have the old-timer like I had to help them get started. I think it could take up to 20 years coming back.

Keller: Do you have a most memorable moment in your life as a wrestler and promoter?

Jarrett: It's so hard to separate my personal life from my business life. There's been so many of them. Elvis Presley sold out the Mid-South Coliseum with three consecutive shows. Tojo (Yamamoto) and I sold it out seven consecutive times. That fourth night, knowing I had done something no one else had done right at home, that was a memorable night.

In the early part of Jerry Lawler's career we had a running program for about a year called "Quest for the Title." It culminated with Jerry Lawler wrestling Jack Brisco in Memphis. We had to turn people away. Eddie Graham, Mike Graham, Lester Welch, Buddy Fuller, Jim Barnette, and Sam Muchnick all came in. To see a little local hero wrestling the NWA World Champion to a sold out crowd and have it be such a sensational match was just tremendous. It was just one of those nights with 11,400 screaming fans inside, a couple of thousand outside, knowing I had something to do with creating that electricity was a real highlight.

Sitting across the table from Vince McMahon and having him—who has achieved heights in the wrestling business that nobody ever dreamed—tell me that he thought I was the most creative person in the wrestling business was an Earth-shattering moment. I know in our relationship he has given ten times more than he has gotten. There is absolutely no motivation for him to help us here in Tennessee. None. I knew that going in and in phone conversations prior to the meeting, he knew where I was and I knew where he was.

Keller: Who do you admire most in the wrestling business?

Jarrett: Eddie Graham, until the day he died, was absolutely the greatest mind this business has ever had. Eddie and I were really close friends. He had shortcomings just as we all did. When you're friends with somebody, you care about them with all of their baggage. Eddie had his problems like all of us do. When I sit down and let myself sink into a melancholy funk, I miss most guys like Eddie Graham, guys who when you were in need, when you were in trouble, you could pick up the phone and he would jump in his plane or jump in a car and be at your side. That's a camaraderie that I really miss from the old days. It wasn't just Eddie. It was Jim Crockett Sr. When I had my problems with Nick (Gulas), I guess eight or ten guys picked up the phone and said, "I've got an extra \$50,000. Do you need it?" And they'd send it to ya'. Had I needed it, they would have transferred it to the bank. Now, picture that in today's climate.

I remember a lot of things, it wasn't just talk. Fritz Von Erich had his war back then. Don Owens had his problems. Verne and Fritz and Watts and LeRoy (McGuirk) got all twisted up. We all went down there talked to them and asked how we could help make it right. Those are just days that you miss as an old-timer. It's really hard. My biggest regret is that those days of camaraderie are no more. Like the movie, "Gone with the Wind." Gone.

Keller: What would you miss most if you were to leave the business tomorrow?

Jarrett: The ability to create. I take great pride

in the fact that Hulk Hogan came here as a big ol' scrapping musician who couldn't walk and chew bubble gum and left here knowing the difference between a headlock and a wristlock. I take great pride in the fact that Jimmy Hart came here a broke musician and left here being capable of being a very proficient manager.

I take great pride in the fact that two boys got in that car and drove here from California and I gave them their first matches and they went on to be simultaneously the two biggest stars in wrestling at the same time, The Ultimate Warrior and Sting. We booked them as the Blade Runners. The list goes on and on.

Keller: Capsulize your thoughts on Jerry Lawler.

Jarrett: Unquestionably, the most talented person this business has ever produced. Without any question. He is gifted. He is, I think, one of the most incredible artists I've ever seen. And the same innate talent that he has in his art, he has in his communication skills, he has in his psychology in the ring. In his prime in the ring there was nobody who could bump better or was more convincing or could verbalize his feelings more. He has no peers.

Keller: What has been the best part about working with him behind the scenes?

Jarrett: This innate talent. He and I will still to this day, 20, 25 years down the road, both of our secret ambitions is to write for Saturday Night Live. We will start a scenario and have each other in stitches. He'll give a line, I'll give a line, and we'll get into the role of what we're doing and just play off of it. We'll sit down sometimes. He lives geographically in Memphis now, so we see each other every Saturday and every Monday, and we spend a lot of time on the phone. The one-liners we exchange are a real bright spot in my day.

Keller: What about the worst part of dealing with him behind the scenes?

Jarrett: He hates the business-end of the business. He may be the world's worst businessman. He would rather just be one of the boys, so I've had to carry the burden of our partnership through all of the years of being the businessman. He'll call me and say, "Call them up there and tell them I'm not doing this." I'd say, Jerry, I can't carry that ball for you.

Keller: Tell me about Vince McMahon?

Jarrett: Vince McMahon is the boldest promoter that I have ever heard about or read about. Anybody who gambled to the extent that he did deserves what happened because he absolutely risked it all. For that I admire him.

Keller: What about Dusty Rhodes as a person and as a booker?

Jarrett: Dusty Rhodes has the unquestioned biggest ego there has ever been in the wrestling business.

Keller: Because it has been talked about so much over the years, I think some people probably believe Dusty's ego has been caricatured or exaggerated. Has it been?

Jarrett: No, it hasn't been. Here's an example. I booked a big card in Memphis, had about 30 of the top names in the country on the card. The ticket sales were not going up to expectations. I calculated all of my trans. This was pre-WWF days. I calculated that I was going to draw about 30,000 dollars and with the way I had it going and my advertising, I figured I was going to lose about 20,000 dollars. So I sat down with my staff at that time and I said, we are going to have to pair this card down to about 20 wrestlers. We sat down and keeping in mind the Memphis market, we paired it down to the 20 we thought would draw the most money.

I called Dusty and told him that we had revised the card and we still had about three weeks so we could correct our advertising and that I wouldn't need him there, so he could go ahead and make arrangements to work that night elsewhere. He was booking for Eddie Graham in Florida at the time. Ten years later, Jerry Lawler is wrestling on a "Lord of the Rings" match in Florida. Jerry goes to the ring for his match and when he comes back, there is an autographed picture of Dusty Rhodes lying in Jerry's bag that says, "To the King, preliminary boy, from The American Dream, Dusty Rhodes." Now how could somebody be offended because you decide you can't afford 30 of the top wrestlers in the country in Memphis, Tenn. and remember it for 10 years? This was literally the only time we had conflict in cancelling him.

He calls me up afterward and says, "You know, I take this as a big insult. You're having one of the biggest cards ever booked in the South. How are you going to have it without the Dream on it." I said, "Dusty, it doesn't mean anything like that. But with your exposure, you're not known in Memphis like you are everywhere else. So then we had the other experiences. We did some co-shows that were phenomenally successful, drew 80,000 and 88,000 dollars in Lexington and Memphis with Crockett. Then Jim Herd told me that one day—he flew out to Texas to talk to me about helping Dusty with the book—we never got to the point of talking about my duties, or money, or whether I was consulting or full-time, we never got that far—and he said Dusty Rhodes went into a three day tirade. Dusty said, "Heavens no, I'll walk out, I'll quit."

The only thing I could go back to is this cancelling 15 years ago in Memphis. That, Wade, is an enormous ego. On top of that, I've heard 2,000 war stories. That's just one very personal experience.

Buddy Fuller was partners with Eddie Graham and they used to cut up 100,000 a month among the partners. This was during a time I was down there. I know how much money they made because I had 20 or 25 percent of it. It was a gold mine. Eddie would book like we all did, 12 or 14



Dusty Rhodes

Photo WK

men, a main event, a semi-final, and two or three preliminary matches and just made money hand over fist. Buddy Fuller ended up leaving Florida and breaking up his association with Eddie because Dusty would draw fifty thousand dollars and spend sixty. I know that firsthand. Buddy just walked out. He wanted to get out because it started losing big money. It went from making 100,000 dollars to losing 20 or 30 thousand. And I'll let Jim Crockett tell you about his ride. He had a wonderful ride from airplanes with "Stardust" written on the tail of them—it probably gets into the millions.

A capsule of Dusty Rhodes? The absolute biggest ego that has ever been in the wrestling business.

Keller: Do you have any thoughts on the current top two in WCW, Bill Shaw and Bob Dhue?

Jarrett: I met with Dhue twice and Shaw once and it's the strangest thing—I left without having any idea whether they liked wrestling, didn't like it, had a feel for it, didn't have a feel for it, whether they understood me or not. I'm assuming they didn't. I got absolutely no feel for it.

Keller: How about Bill Watts.

Jarrett: A brilliant mind for the business, but inability to adapt to changing times.

Keller: When Bill Watts was successful, what were his major strengths and weaknesses?

Jarrett: He utilized TV to the maximum. He was just very good at getting everything you could get into an hour of television. Then, what's strange to me is that Bill was terribly adaptable in those days. His business got really bad and we were selling out in Memphis. He called me on the telephone and said, "Jerry, I'm losing money and I'd like to come up and see what you're doing right." So he came here to the house, we chatted for a day or two, and then Monday night we went to Memphis. He and I sat up in the stands together. I said, "Bill, you've always believed in the big, strong, slow heavyweights and I think in Oklahoma and Louisiana, if you remember back, Danny Hodge was the biggest box office that they had out there. He's a middleweight. My suggestion is you give them a contrast." He said, "Well, here you've got a bunch of guys who can work." I said, "We're selling out every night. I'll tell you what, take ten of my boys and let me send (Bill) Dundee as my booker and try the middleweight style that I emphasize here." He did that and didn't flinch about it. He made a complete turnaround from the big Junkyard Dog heavyweight style to a high-flying, rapid-paced style. That's when we sent Jimmy Cornette as the manager; I had Jimmy Hart and Cornette, and they were at each other's throats. I thought this would give me a break from refereeing. I sent Cornette, Bobby Eaton, Terry Taylor, Koko (B. Ware), The Rock & Roll Express. Ten guys. The

whole crew. And he had the biggest run he's ever had in his life.

It really was hard for him. Bill was a huge man. He just had a natural affinity for other big guys, like "Dr. Death" Steve Williams and Hacksaw Duggan. But he showed an ability to change.

Keller: From knowing him, what do you think accounts for his change in temperament to the point of being almost intolerable to work with in WCW?

Jarrett: He didn't change. He was always like that. He didn't change in that way. He used to scream and light into guys. He was always a tyrant. I don't know what happened down there (in WCW). I guess he threw some fanatical rages with some of the suits down in Atlanta. You can't do that. I think Bill thought he could go back to the future and you can't do that in anything.

Keller: What about the portrayal of women in the USWA? In your promotion, there aren't generally a lot of strong female characters and the vast majority of the women come out there with the main goal seemingly to rip another woman's clothes off. Do you think that's degrading to women and bad programming for kids? Do you have a higher responsibility or because it's just wrestling, is it okay?

Jarrett: With the shortage of talent on the male side of the ledger, if you multiply that by about 10,000, you have a perspective of the shortage of talent on the female side of it. There is very little inducement for new girls to come into the business because of the very limited roles they play with the two major companies, the WWF and WCW. Therefore we have a critical shortage of female talent. My background is that my father deserted our family when I was three years old. I was raised by my mother. Maybe, and I don't know—nobody's ever asked me this question before, so I'm groping as I'm answering—I remember during all of my life my mother having to fight to get credit every time she would go into the bank. Me and my sister would go along with her. I remember it was almost a humiliating experience. "Where does your husband work?" "I don't have a husband. I work." "Just one income? Where do you live?" "Well, we live with my grandparents." "You don't have a home? What about a car?" "Well, we ride the bus." "Well, Mrs. Jarrett, I'm sorry, we just can't let you have 1,500 dollars for a motorcycle." I vividly remember that. In my family, my wife and my daughter call me the only women's libber in the family.

So, what you may see is a result of me feeling, because I've always felt like this, that women could do any job that any man could do. So, I don't know, but I'll give it some thought. My thinking is, if you went back and looked at the role I have women in and changed the gender, it wouldn't look at all different.

Keller: So you don't think it would be strange if Brian Christopher and Jerry Lawler

had a "winner strip down to their bikini underwear" match, which you have had with women?

Jarrett: I have those matches all of the time. We call them "Tennessee Back Alley Street Brawls." Now, Wade, I am open to scrutiny on this point because you really caught me off guard. I don't perceive myself as that and when I book, I don't think "these are women." I just feel they are the gals. I have found that women have a lot less scruples as to how much flesh they show than men. I have had to tell them, "You can't wear that outfit to the ring." I don't know. I guess it's more open to interpretation. I don't perceive myself that way. Maybe I should give it more thought, but I think these are ludicrous arguments about whether women should be in combat. Hell, if they want to be, they can do it. I wouldn't have any qualms about electing a woman senator or president. I wouldn't have any problem at all as a wrestler working for Linda McMahon as I would Vince McMahon.

Keller: Do you have a different hiring philosophy for women wrestlers versus men wrestlers? The impression I have from reports out of Memphis is that Monday nights when women wrestle, it's more of a stereotypical "cat fight" than a traditional wrestling match. I don't see a lot of your male wrestlers coming out and rolling around in the ring without at least some training in pro wrestling.

Jarrett: What I have here is a girl named Jackie Moore—Miss Texas—who is on a talent level with the very best I've had in here. She is just sensational. Her opponents? There was one who knew how to wrestle because she came out of our wrestling school and I personally taught her. That was Leslie Belanger. Leslie is expecting and had to quit. The matches you see are because of the level of opponent Jackie has. Some of them are less than proficient at their trade. So, as a result, I either have to let Jackie go, and I consider her a real asset, particularly in the Memphis market, she's a very talented person, or I book the match I can get.

Keller: Name some wrestlers you are proud to have gotten started.

Jarrett: There have been some people who haven't been megastars, such as Koko B. Ware who is a black man from Union City, Tenn. who everybody said was too little and would never make it in the wrestling business. I told him, "Koko, on a football team, there's 11 people and those 11 people can't be any better than the third string 11 people that practice with them every day. So there is something for everybody." He worked hard and dug and became just a sensational little man and had three nice runs with the WWF.

Jim Cornette took pictures at the matches at Louisville. My mother begged me for two years, "This is a talented kid. He can imitate everybody in the wrestling business, Jerry. Let him in the wrestling business. If he can't wrestle, let him manage." I can remember taking him to

Memphis and him saying, "I've got cotton in my mouth, Jerry, I can't talk." And then he would go on to be what some consider to be the best manager who's ever been in the business.

Sylvester Ritter came here first, then went on to become Junkyard Dog and had an illustrious career with Turner, New York, and Bill Watts in the old Mid-South days.

Those are the things I take the most pride in. We have always been historically a small territory that couldn't compete with the Gagnes or in the early days with the Lebelles in Southern California. So our deal was we couldn't attract a star with money, so we made stars. And that is something I am very proud of.

Keller: What would you miss the least if you were to leave the wrestling business today?

Jarrett: Probably being the boss.

Keller: Some people would probably say they would miss that power the most.

Jarrett: Holy cow, no. It is a terrible, terrible position. To be a good boss, you've got to learn to kiss ass constantly and after years and years and years, it gets bitter and sour and you just have to go right on, forget about the after taste, and continue. To be the boss, you are constantly being the arbitrator between tag teams that are selling out arenas for you but have just grown tired of looking at each other. It gets old. I wouldn't miss having to deal with that kind of thing one bit.

Keller: What about Terry Taylor?

Jarrett: One of my favorite people in the whole world. A class guy. I brought him to Tennessee. He was picking oranges in Florida. He comes from a very good family. He is exceptionally bright. He gave me a book that absolutely altered my life called, "A Slap on the Side of the Head," about not being afraid to fall and stumble. Just an absolute class person. I helped get him and Vince back together. One of the nice people in this business.

Keller: What happened to Terry Taylor? He was considered the next Ric Flair of wrestling and ended up getting the push of a Barry Horowitz? Was he politically inept or did he just run into bad luck.

Jarrett: I don't know. I've got a feeling he is maybe being tested. Terry made a big mistake. You don't tell the director of a movie what role you want to play. In a movie, they have a casting call and you try for the part. If you're supposed to get shot by the cowboy in the saloon in the first scene, you get shot. So he went to Atlanta and got used terribly. You know that revolving door of committees and bookers and all of that stuff, a lot of good talent got chewed up during that time. Then he was out of work, and told Vince he realized it was a business and realized he made a mistake and Vince, as he so often does, gives people chances on top of chances. I told Terry that longevity has its rewards. You can't all of a

sudden go from Indian to Chief in one swift move.

Keller: Did he seem like a student of the game who some day would get into promoting or was he more into just being a wrestler?

Jarrett: If I was ever in a position to do so, I would consider him very heavily as one of my main assistants. He's exceptionally bright.

Keller: Randy Savage?

Jarrett: Randy Savage is the second most talented person I've ever run across in this business from a talent standpoint. At the very top of my list of two or three as far as character goes. He is an absolute loyal person who has not for a day forgotten where he came from. If it was basketball, he would be a coach's dream because he will play whatever role he is asked to play, from superstar to a utility player. He's a class act. I hated what happened with Miss Elizabeth because she and Randy met while he was working for me here and she is also a class act. (Their divorce) is just one of the unfortunate things that occurs in life.

Keller: What about Paul E. Dangerously?

Jarrett: Paul E. is a very, very talented guy. He is a stumblebum at politics. He is so inept politically, he doesn't get a chance to display his talents as a performer.

Keller: Has that changed over time?

Jarrett: I don't know that it's maturity or immaturity. I mean, some people have trouble in areas, and Paul E. has trouble politically. And of course, as you know, all of life is politics. You and I are in a political exchange right now. You're wanting your ends met, I'm hoping through the interview to get across some of mine and hopefully the right person will read it and receive it the right way. Paul E. doesn't grasp that political part of the business, thus he constantly stays in hot water politically. But he's very talented.

Keller: How does your experience with Jim Cornette early on compare with Paul E. early on?

Jarrett: Jim Cornette is bright, talented as a manager. The jury is out still. Only time will tell, whether he is able to transfer his talents as a manager and personality to that of running a territory. His situation is being subsidized. I personally think he started out making some terrible mistakes with overpaying talent. When I say "overpaying talent," I don't mean that if you pay a guy 200 dollars, that's overpaying him or if you pay a guy 200,000 dollars, that's overpaying him. What I mean by overpaying him is when you go to a town and that town draws 2,000 dollars, and you've got 500 rent, 200 publicity, and another 200 for security and ticket sellers and ticket takers, and then you pay your taxes and your insurance, and you've got 900 dollars left and you pay 1,500 to the boys. In that situation,

they're getting overpaid.

Keller: So you don't think it was worth an early investment in SMW, even if that meant losing some money, to get the ball rolling. You think he should have played it conservatively from the start?

Jarrett: Yeah. I think he could have gotten the same talent. It's like I told him in Atlanta. Scott Steiner was making 500 to 700 dollars a week from me. Atlanta called him and I'm gonna guess paid him 100,000 dollars a year to start. Within a year, and I forget the figures, Scott—who I consider a real good friend—called and said, "They want me to sign this damn thing for 250,000 dollars, Jerry, and I just think it's ridiculous." I said, "Scott, your alternative is to come back to me for 500. Sign it." Why would you create an environment like that when the company is losing money to think about paying 250,000 dollars a year? That's overpaying the boys. I consider Scott a great talent and I do not blame him at all. As a matter of fact, in retrospect, at the time he probably should have gone in and asked for 750,000.

But back to Cornette, I don't know yet if (he will cut it as a promoter). There hasn't been enough time. I can tell you this. Thus far he has done a phenomenal job to open up a company when everybody else was downscaling and going out of business.

Keller: What do you think of his television?

Jarrett: The two or three shows I've seen, he does the best he can do with what he's got.

Keller: Compare the differences early on among Jimmy Hart, Cornette, and Dangerously, both on and off camera.

Jarrett: All of them were very, very different. On camera, Paul E. Dangerously came across as a rich, arrogant kid. Jim Cornette came across as a mama's boy. Jimmy Hart came across as the hyper guy that you love to hate. Jimmy Hart probably had more fans as a manager than anybody I ever had here, yet he drew more than anybody I ever had here. Cornette can get the most realistic, intense heat. Paul E. was politically inept here and was the least athletic of the three. I think he's tremendously intelligent. It's hard to make comparisons, but if I just had to guess, I would say he was the most intelligent. You could give him a concept and he could verbalize it. Of course, all three of them had that talent. That's what it takes to be a manager. You have to have a personality that doesn't necessarily endear you to the fans. What we do as wrestlers, as characters, is similar to an artist when he draws a caricature and accentuates the features. A manager accentuates his features verbally. In fact, he draws with word caricatures. That's what I mean.

I found Paul E. Dangerously exceptionally bright. He could pick up on something and verbalize it real good. He had a hundred ideas. Cornette, after he developed, was able to do that.

At first, Cornette went out and played the role. He and his mother had a real close relationship and just in conversation he would say, "My mom said..." and "My mom this..." I picked up on that caricature and expanded it verbally. We made a verbal caricature of Jim Cornette being a mama's boy. So in his early development he played this one role. Then later on he picked up what Paul E. was able to do and that is verbalize and expand on an idea.

Jimmy Hart was incredibly bright. You didn't have to tell him but one time and he was off and running and could carry a half hour of television. He was just this hyper jitter-bug unlimited, unbounding energy and he would get killed during the week and come back on TV and say, "This was the greatest day of my life." So his was totally different. There was some similarity between Paul E. and Jim Cornette. Now, as to reaching their apex, I think Cornette probably surpassed them.

Keller: For what do you not admire Vince McMahon?

Jarrett: I wish he hadn't felt the necessity to verbalize his direction of carrying the wrestling business to the general public. That is not to criticize him because it may not have been possible for him to obtain the broad base he did without that, but as an old-timer, I wish he could have done it without making the statements that he made.

Keller: What about J.J. Dillon?

Jarrett: He is the most loyal company man who has ever been in the wrestling business. This goes back a while. He was with Crockett, he was with Turner, and now he's with Vince. He has no equal in that. Being an owner, I can appreciate that.

Keller: What about Jim Herd?

Jarrett: The biggest character I've ever met out of the ring in the wrestling business. Without a doubt the biggest character I've ever met within a job he was not equipped to handle which ultimately ended in his demise. I watched him work and he was the biggest asset this business has ever had for getting the program on television. He should be to this day somebody's syndication man. He is phenomenal at that. As far as Jack Petrik goes, he should have covered up his dislike for wrestling. You just can't be in charge of something that you dislike.

Keller: What about Jim Crockett Jr.?

Jarrett: A tremendous victim of the wrestling business. He was victimized by Dusty Rhodes. He was victimized by the wrestlers. He was victimized by Turner. A victim.

Keller: What about his knowledge, his demeanor, his talent, what he brings to the game?

Jarrett: He has the best chance now of ever making it, because getting hit right in the face

repeatedly makes you tough. He has been dumped on a lot.

Keller: Linda McMahon?

Jarrett: (Vince and Linda have) always had a partnership. When I first went up to their offices, I met them both together. We sat down and talked. It's always been a co-venture. Linda is an extremely bright person.

Keller: Do you think Linda has had more influence on the day-to-day operations and the direction of the WWF than people generally give her credit for?

Jarrett: I don't know. All that I know is when I met with Titan and talked with them, I was carried around to every department to see what they do and what their role was and when it was time for me to meet with Vince and Linda, I met with them both jointly. I've never inquired (about the extent of her role). I just know that all of the contact I've ever had with her—and this goes back to the old NWA days when I would see them and have dinner with them at the Alliance meetings—they've always been a team. That's all I can say. As far as day-to-day operations, I couldn't tell you what Pat Patterson does and what Vince does and what J.J. Dillon does. I've never asked them.

Keller: What's your best quality and worst quality when dealing with wrestlers? What do you think wrestlers say behind your back that is good and bad?

Jarrett: I think what they probably like is that they know I am genuinely interested in the advancement of their career and will go to extraordinary lengths to improve upon their shortcomings.

My guess would be that what they would say bad about me is, "He is very tight and when the house is bad, he won't pay you." My answer is every one of them who comes into the office—and it's always been this way since I've been in business—I sit them down and say, "You may not understand the wrestling business. I am not your boss. You're not punching a timeclock. You don't have a time to report to work and a time to leave. I want you at the matches an hour before match time. That's not an unreasonable thing because you have to get dressed and I have to be sure that you're there so I have an hour to get a substitute if you're not. And I can't go to the ring with you and tell you how to do your match. So therefore, with those prerogatives, the law says you're an independent contractor. As in any independent contract, as with a general contractor or an agent or a promoter or whatever you want to call me, we have a partnership. Here is the way the partnership works. I risk the rent on the building, the cost of security, ticket-takers, the cost of producing the TV, and/or buying the TV time, I have to have a ring there and a referee there and every time we go to any town, I have anywhere from 1,000 dollars to 5,000 at risk. In our partnership, I will not ask

Paul E. Dangerously is a very, very talented guy. He is a stumblebum at politics. He is so inept politically, he doesn't get a chance to display his talents as a performer... Paul E. doesn't grasp the political part of the business, thus he constantly stays in hot water politically. But he's very talented.

you to cover any of those losses. Your contribution to our partnership is to perform. I will see to it that you get enough money regardless of how great my losses are to get to the town and eat at McDonalds and get home. At the end of the night, we will sit down and pay the rent and pay the police and we'll pay the ushers and ticket sellers and the cost of the TV and the liability insurance and taxes. Any money that's left we will divide among the wrestlers and the office. This split will never be less than 30 percent for the wrestlers no matter how poorly we draw. In middle-range houses, the talent expense may reach 60 percent of the house. In a loss, it can go as high as 100 percent of the house. On a very, very big house, the minimum the talent will get is 30 percent. Somebody has to have the discretion of dividing this 30, 50, 60, 100 percent among the wrestlers. I serve as the arbitrator. If you are ever upset with your share, please do not discuss it, don't sit around in the dressing rooms and raise hell about it. Come into the office and we'll pull the report out and we'll look at it and you tell me what you think. If I've made a mistake, I'll correct it. And if I don't feel that I have, we'll mutually part ways."

Everybody is given the same little talk. And I'm sincere when I give that speech. I think there would be 22 offices in business if they had all done it that way. But I'm not about (getting into a bidding war) when Jimmy Hart comes to me and says, "I can go to New York and I think I can make 2,000 a week and I'm only making 1,200 here," which was the case when he left. Some other promoters in similar situations gave in and would have given Jimmy 2,000 dollars a week and expedited their exit from the business. I said to him as I did to Randy Savage as I did to Koko Ware as I did to every one of them who has left, "Good luck. I sincerely wish you the best. And call me when your run's over." But I wasn't going to go out of business trying to compete with Vince McMahon. He's too rich and he's too smart and he's too powerful. So I decided early on to do the best I could with what I've got.

SHEIK KAISSSEY

The following is a "Torch Talk" with Adnan Al Kaissey, known most recently as "General Adnan." Adnan, who currently wrestles independently in Minnesota, was involved in the controversial Persian Gulf War angle that Vince McMahon promoted in 1991 where he managed Sgt. Slaughter. Adnan discusses whether he regrets being involved in that angle. He also reminisces about his entire career in pro wrestling and looks to his future. This one-part interview was conducted on Jan. 3, 1993.

Wade Keller: How did you get involved in wrestling?

Sheik Adnan Al Kaissey: Before I came to the United States of America, I was in amateur wrestling. I was involved in wrestling, soccer, track and field, and stuff like that. I was heavyweight champion for three or four years. Then I came to the United States, the University of Oklahoma for a full scholarship to play football, linebacker. I did wrestling, too. I was runner up in freestyle in the NCAA three or four times. I got my degree in social science and I got my masters degree in education and psychology.

Keller: Where did you get your masters degree?

Adnan: At the University of Oregon Eugene. Then I went back to Bagdad and worked as a general director of youth at the Ministry of Youth, which was a big job.

Keller: How long were you there?

Adnan: I was there for about six or seven years, at that position. I worked with the youth, counseling and social work and everything. Then I came back in '76 and went back to wrestling again. Then I went on and on here and there and ended up in Minnesota and wrestled as the Sheik.

Keller: You wrestled under a different identity, also?

Adnan: Yes, Billy White Wolfe before I went back home.

Keller: Why did you decide to get involved in pro wrestling given that you had the masters degree?

Adnan: That's why I tried to get a job with it. In Bagdad, they were paying good money but I just couldn't take it. There was too much political pressure. They want you to belong to the party. The party wants you to do what they want you to do.

Keller: In what ways did you disagree with the government?

Adnan: Well, first, I didn't want to belong to

the party or any political organization at that time. They want you to direct the youth the way they wanted you to. It's not you teaching them, it's the government.

Keller: What about your family? Did anyone follow you to the United States?

Adnan: My mom, dad, four brothers, and one sister all stayed in Bagdad.

Keller: When did you first enter the AWA? In 1981?

Adnan: 1981. Yes. Before then I was in Hawaii, New York for Vince McMahon, and Oregon.

Keller: What are some of your strongest memories from your days on the road before you entered the AWA?

Adnan: An accident happened. A small plane in Sydney, Australia almost crashed. One time in the AWA, the door opened in the back of a plane while we were in the air and it almost had to crash land. One time we were flying through a bad storm and it was shaking all about and—oh my god—it seemed like it was going to fall apart. A lot of things like that. Snow on the roads and ending up in ditches.

Keller: Have you ever run into violent fans?

Adnan: In Winnipeg one time, I was hit really hard and knocked out. One time in Chicago, a couple of fans attacked me inside the ring.

Keller: Did people recognize you and harass you?

Adnan: Yeah, they pick on you. They know who you are.

Keller: Does that bother you?

Adnan: It's part of the show, part of the business. You gotta keep it up and keep going. It's as simple as that.

Keller: How would you compare the pay you received to the amount of work you went through?

Adnan: It was pretty good. There really weren't many expenses. In the WWF there are too many expenses, the hotel, renting a car, you know.

Keller: In what time during your career do you believe you were most fulfilled?

Adnan: I would say in Portland when I was going to school and wrestling, too. That was a good time. No headaches, no pain. Studying all the time, making a lot of money. It was nice, you know. Relaxed.

Keller: What prompted you to go to the AWA?

Adnan: I met Wally Karbo and Wally wanted me to come down because they never had a Sheik before. And he promised me money. At the time I wasn't doing anything. I was just relaxing, so I

thought I would give it a try.

Keller: Anytime during your career were you financially well-off or did you live paycheck to paycheck?

Adnan: I started from nothing, just like other students who went to school. I had to save everything and keep going.

Keller: What was satisfying about your days in the AWA?

Adnan: Selling out everywhere. It was a good feeling to know that you were doing so well.

Keller: Did you get adrenaline rushes from the large crowds the AWA was drawing at that time?

Adnan: No, we had bigger crowds back home. In Bagdad we had over 150,000 people around '71 with wrestlers from the area and Europe and Japan and the States.

Keller: What about the negatives of working in the AWA?

Adnan: The promotion of it. The promoter. The greediness. They worked you to death and didn't feel for anybody.

Keller: What do you think of Verne Gagne?

Adnan: He has his own way of promoting and living, so I cannot really say much else. He's a promoter, just like the rest of them. Not much different. He has his own way of promoting, not paying the wrestlers the right money, this and that. When they know you're a big star, they ignore you and treat you like a piece of sh—because they don't want you to think you are important.

Keller: Was Verne more like that than most promoters, or did Don Owen for instance treat you that way, also?

Adnan: No. Don was different. He was a good person, very nice. He was an exception to the rule. Dennis from Milwaukee was a good guy. Vince McMahon is the same as Verne Gagne.

Keller: But on a one-to-ten scale, dealing with both Gagne and McMahon would rate below five?

Adnan: I guess so. They never tell you the truth, that's for sure.

Keller: What are some of the things they would promise and not deliver?

Adnan: Anything having to do with the promotion. Anything, you name it.

Keller: What is your opinion of the current state of wrestling?

Adnan: It has gotten worse. The promoters have ruined the wrestling business. Before it used to be territorial promotions. You could come to Minneapolis, get tired of it, go to New York, they'd use you for a while, then you go to Hawaii or Washington or Oregon. Now there are only two of them and when they're through with you,

they tell you to go to hell and then you're dead. McMahon doesn't care about the wrestlers. He's looking out for himself only. Before it was better, now it's worse. It's as simple as that.

Keller: Is it the natural course of things that the promoter and the wrestlers have to be adversaries?

Adnan: No, they made it that way. Everybody was here in the AWA—Hulk, Andre, you name them—and the promoters were mean to the wrestlers and all the boys started leaving.

Keller: What could realistically be done to help wrestling in your eyes?

Adnan: Go back to the regional promotions. If people would start promoting here and there and get wrestlers and television, just like it was before, that would be fantastic.

Keller: Why isn't that being done now?

Adnan: They need the money and they need the TV, and now it's hard to get that.

Keller: What is the change that has occurred in wrestling since you have been involved in the sport?

Adnan: They've got exposure nationally. The fame came into it. A lot of boys made big money making movies and doing commercials.

Keller: Have you ever regretted getting involved in pro wrestling?

Adnan: No, but if I had the chance, I would not do it all over again. I would like to go into teaching or coaching. At least you get benefits. What do you get from wrestling after 20 or 30 years? If you didn't save your money, what do you have? I probably would have enjoyed teaching more. There's no retirement in wrestling.

Keller: Do you plan to stay involved in wrestling?

Adnan: Now and then, for a good cause.

Keller: What else do you do?

Adnan: I'm trying to get a job working with the city, counseling. I have three applications already in.

Keller: What prompted you to go to the WWF?

Adnan: They promised me good money because of the war situation and me being from Bagdad and all that. So I did it for a year and a half. And the money was good.

Keller: You must be aware of the controversy that came out of that angle in the media and with fan backlash. Do you agree the angle was in poor taste?

Adnan: Yeah, there was a lot of heat. It was in poor taste, but the promoter wants to take advantage of it and make money. Sarge and I were the hottest thing ever to hit the WWF for a while there.

They promised me good money because of the war situation and me being from Bagdad. Vince wouldn't have cared if me or Sarge got shot with a machine gun. He would've been happy. I wore a bullet-proof vest.

Keller: Do you regret participating in the angle?

Adnan: I will do anything the first time, but I do not care to do it again.

Keller: Do you think McMahon felt bad that parents whose kids were dying or risking their lives overseas saw those efforts exploited by the WWF?

Adnan: Hey, Vince wouldn't have cared if me or Sarge got shot with a machine gun. He would've been happy.

Keller: Did you think it was ethically questionable when McMahon first proposed the idea to you or was it the actual execution of the angle that you objected to?

Adnan: Well, I never thought the war was going to go on. I never thought they were going to go to war.

Keller: If you knew that war was inevitable, would you have probably refused to participate in the angle?

Adnan: Yes. Sure.

Keller: Did you ever think of pulling out of the angle?

Adnan: No, it was too late.

Keller: Did Slaughter ever show regret behind the scenes for what he was doing?

Adnan: He did later on, but not during.

Keller: Was that probably the time in your career when you most feared for your safety?

Adnan: Yeah, I wore a bullet proof vest. We have a lot of guards, so there was no problem. Outside the ring I changed my looks.

Keller: What was the worst part about being involved in wrestling?

Adnan: The injuries.

Keller: Whom, through, all of your travels, do you admire most?

Adnan: Ivan Koloff. He's a good person. He's a fantastic person.

Keller: Thanks for your time.

Adnan: You're welcome.

REFLECTIONS

Sheik Adnan Al Kaisey: Most Torch Talk subjects are familiar with the *Torch*, read it regularly, know the tone of the questions that are going to be asked, and know that elaborate answers are encouraged. Adnan was a nice enough guy during the interview, but didn't seem entirely familiar with the format and kept his answers guarded and short.

Nevertheless, there were a few gems of insight during the short interview, including his admitting how much he feared for his safety while he played an Iraqi sympathizer during the Gulf War. He also said he went into the angle not thinking the U.S. would actually go to war with Iraq. Like many former WWF wrestlers, he had negative things to say about Vince McMahon, seemingly inspired by the fact that the WWF was unable to offer him lifetime employment.

Today Adnan is wrestling independently periodically in the Minnesota area. He owned a grocery store in Minneapolis, but that store has since closed.

Stan Lane: It was fun interviewing Stan Lane. He was exactly as he came across on television—a Sam Malone type character who wanted to be treated fairly and wanted to have fun.

Most insightful was the difference he drew between himself and Ric Flair, how he could hang up the tights and not miss being "Sweet Stan," but being "Nature Boy" to Flair was a part of his life he couldn't leave behind.

Lane's unique perspective came from having been part of so many territories—Mid-Atlantic, Memphis, the AWA, Jim Crockett Promotions, , WCW, and SMW. His comparisons between the promotions and analyses of the promoters put in perspective why some failed and others made it. His comments about Jim Cornette's style of business prompted a long letter by Cornette to the *Torch* in response.

After this interview Lane went to the WWF and worked briefly as an announcer and has since left the WWF and wrestling entirely.

Jerry Lawler: I once called Jerry Lawler on the phone with a specific question regarding a news story I had heard. His response was an impolite, "Why would I tell you?" Before that we had done an extensive interview for the *1991 Pro Wrestling Torch Annual IV*. When he was charged with statutory rape and the WWF released him, albeit temporarily, he found time to talk to me again.

One of the sport's best talkers is no less a good interview subject than he is at cutting promos for an upcoming match. During this interview Lawler seemed especially humbled by the legal trouble that was still pending and could have sent him to jail. He was appreciative of what he had, and talked matter of factly about wrestling in front of ever decreasing crowds in Memphis.

He also addressed his legal situation and defended himself against the allegations.

STAN LANE

As a member of two of the more prominent tag teams in the '80s, Stan Lane's 15 year wrestling career was full of breaks. Although he paid his dues and took long road trips in his career to earn his stripes, Lane was on the receiving end of fortunate breaks from two of wrestling's top stars, Ric Flair and Dusty Rhodes. In the following June 28, 1993 "Torch Talk" interview conducted via telephone from Lane's home in Charlotte, N.C., he discusses how he got into wrestling, why he left Smoky Mountain Wrestling, his thoughts on Jim Cornette, and if his relationship with Cornette changed after he started working for him.

Wade Keller: How did you originally get interested in becoming a pro wrestler?

Stan Lane: It all started in the summer of '78. I was working down in Mertle Beach in South Carolina. I had a couple of jobs. I worked as a bouncer at a nightclub in the evenings at Mother Fletchers and I worked during the mornings at the Mertle Beach Hilton doing room service. I had watched professional wrestling some. I'm not what you would call an avid fan of it, but I had noticed a gentleman whom I identified with and I liked his style a lot; that was Ric Flair. I always enjoyed Ric's interviews. He always talked about



Stan Lane

Photo by WK

all the partying and the ladies, all the Cadillac cars and all that kind of stuff. I enjoyed that quite a bit. I had watched wrestling some when I was younger in the mid-'60s, Johnny Weaver, George Becker, and Bronco Lubich, very briefly. Like I said, though, I wasn't a big fan of it until I'd seen Ric.

One morning an order came down for room service. The order said four Bloody Marys. The name on there was Flair. I looked at that and wondered if it could possibly be Ric Flair. So I grabbed the order—not only because of that, but I always grabbed the easy-to-fill orders as opposed to three different orders of bacon and eggs and juice and coffee. This was a whole lot easier to carry. So I grabbed it and went up to the room and knocked on the door. The door opened and sure enough it was Ric Flair standing there in his underwear in all his glory. Being astonished a little bit and shocked, the first words that escaped my mouth were, "Nature Boy!" I yelled that out. He said, "Hey, how are you brother."

Keller: How old were you at this time?

Lane: I was 25 years old. This was the summer of '78. He said, "Come on in." So I went in. I also met his future wife, Beth, and that was the first time I had ever really had an overnight excursion. It was a red-letter day in the world of professional wrestling. I went over there and put down the order. I can't remember the bill he gave me. I think he only had a fifty and I didn't have enough change on me to give him back the proper amount. I told him I would go down to the cashier and come back with the change. He said, "No, no, don't do that." I guess they were busy. He said to keep the change. I thanked him. I left and thought to myself, I wouldn't mind talking to him a little more. After my shift went off, I did some push-ups and got all pumped up. I sound like a really big mark, but what the hell. I was even bigger then than I was during most of my wrestling career. I was, of course, a lot younger and I was working out really hard down there. I weighed, I guess, 230, 235 then, so I was big. So anyway, I got all pumped up. I went back to his room to give him his change. I thought that would impress him. He wasn't there, so I went, "Aw, damn." I walked out to the pool bar and I looked out at the beach and saw Ric and Beth, and also Greg Valentine and his wife, Julie. So I took my shirt off and walked down to the beach and I approached Ric with the money. I think that did impress him, returning his change.

I mentioned I enjoyed watching him on TV. I said I had thought of becoming a wrestler. He kind of sized me up and said, "You're definitely big enough." He asked me what I did and I told him I was a bouncer. I invited him to a pool party the next day at the Landmark Hotel there. I was down there with a bunch of my friends. Living down there, I knew a lot of girls, so I was down there with three or four hot looking girls. I saw Ric down there, and Blackjack Mulligan and Greg Valentine and a few others. I kind of

walked by with my entourage, if you will, and he was kind of eyeballing that. I think he was impressed with that. I hit his hot-button. I said, "Ric, I'm Stan Lane. I don't know if you remember me from yesterday." He said sure and bought me several drinks. We talked a long time. He was most gracious. He wound up giving me his home phone number. This was in August and I told him I was leaving the beach after Labor Day. Things kind of wind down there, it's a very seasonal place. He told me to give him a call.

I called him several weeks later, around the middle of September and, to make a long story short, I wound up driving down to Ric's house in Charlotte about an average of three or four times a week. Ric had personally trained me in the backyard of his house. The training went on about a month and a half. That's how it all started for me.

Keller: Did you train in the ring or just the backyard?

Lane: In the backyard. We would do these Hindu squats for about a half hour. He'd kill me. The first day, I did about 175 of them. It sounds very easy to do bodyweight squats, but after you do 50 to 75, your legs turn to rubber. I had never done them before. I had lifted heavy barbells before, but never repetitions. He had done these for years and he was a master of them. It was his way of watching me just finally blow up and fall down. He would say, "Come on, what the hell is wrong with you? Let's go." So I'd get up again and do five or six more and fall over again, but I wouldn't quit. He liked that. We would do squats, a Japanese push up which he called "sweepers." It's like a sweeping push-up. We would do those, then wind sprints on his street. Then we'd come back and lift weights. After all of that, we would amateur wrestle in his backyard in the grass. Needless to say, as tired as I was, I got stretched really good.

A lot of times he would bring over Geoff Portz, he was Mr. X in the Charlotte area. He is an English fellow. His son, Jerry, was on the verge of breaking into wrestling. He was about 18. Both Geoff and Jerry were very accomplished amateur wrestlers. They would take turns stretching me. It was me against Ric for three or four minutes, then Jerry against me for around five minutes. The main thing was, I wouldn't quit. Also, another guy who helped me out was Steve Musslin. He wrestled several years later as Steve Travis. I think his biggest claim to fame was being part of a tag team with Rick McGraw as The Carolina Connection. He would come down there and that gave me motivation because I knew him already.

So after we trained in Ric's back yard for almost two months, he took me to a TV taping in Raleigh, N.C. and I met Blackjack Mulligan there. At that time, Blackjack Mulligan and Dicky Murdoch had just bought out the Amarillo territory from Dory Funk Sr. or Jr. So Ric lined it up for me to start out there with him. I packed my car up and headed out to Amarillo, Texas. My

first territory.

Keller: In the two months you trained at Flair's house, how often did you go? Did his wrestling schedule interfere with your training?

Lane: I would drive down three times a week, sometimes four. When Ric wasn't there, Jerry Ortiz would do it. Ric paid him 20 dollars a day to train me while he wasn't there which was very generous of him.

Keller: What was Flair's motive in training you?

Lane: I don't know, especially since I was the only guy he ever did that with. It's amazing. I guess it was because he liked me and he liked my lifestyle. I was a big deal down there at the beach. I was a lifeguard some, a bouncer, I had long, blonde hair. I was sort of like a Ric Flair type in a non-wrestling environment.

Keller: What did you do after high school between ages 18 and 25?

Lane: After high school I attended East Carolina University for two years. I was supposedly majoring in business administration, but I really majored in partying. I joined a fraternity down there and all I did was party. The last several months, I was on academic probation. So it was just a matter of time. I was never what you would call a "student." I was down there having fun. I was there from '71 to '73. In 1970, *Playboy* magazine rated East Carolina University the number one party school in the entire country. And I was there a few years later.

Keller: Did you pick it because of that?

Lane: It was probably in the back of my mind. My dad was a Carolina graduate. My entire childhood growing up it was ingrained in me that I would go to Carolina, but when the time came, my grades weren't good enough and my SAT scores were not good enough for Carolina, so I went to East Carolina. I left there after two years and moved back to my hometown of Greensboro. I went to college two more years, at Gilford Technical Institute, majoring in business administration basically knowing I didn't want a coat and tie, 9-to-5 job. I didn't know what I wanted to do, but I knew I wanted to do something that was glamorous, be it movies or whatever. I didn't know how to get there. I knew I wanted to be in front of people, entertaining them, doing something. Then this wrestling thing just sort of happened for me. It was just sort of fate.

Keller: Some people say Flair is not one to encourage younger wrestlers or help them, other than saying, "Hey, good match." Is that an accurate portrayal of him, or has he been more apt to sit down with young wrestlers and show them the ropes?

Lane: I think Ric years ago helped guys a lot. I think he is a guy from the "old school." He likes

guys who had to work hard for it because he broke in for Verne Gagne. Ric would often tell me stories about guys taking backdrops off of a barn, about a 15 foot drop into hay bails. I think maybe in more recent times, in the past ten years, the guys who have broken in haven't really paid dues the way he and I did. He may not take as much time for them because he didn't have much respect for them. In the older days, it was more of a fraternity type of thing where you had to earn it. Whereas now, some guys if they look the part, if they're big muscleheads in the gym, they're in and they're offered contracts.

Keller: Have you ever seen Flair, during the years you've known him, hold back on helping others who might be a threat to his top position, especially as he got older and some began to question his drawing power?

Lane: No. In all honesty, Flair definitely loves being who he is. He loves the Nature Boy gimmick. That's him. I think when he does finally retire, if he does, he's going to definitely miss that. For me, I could hang it up now and it's not going to kill me to not be "Sweet Stan." You know, big deal. I think his persona of the Nature Boy being the champ, he will definitely miss that. I've never seen him say anything or keep a kid down because he was concerned, though.

Keller: When did Flair let you in on the inner-workings of the business and ring work? Were you aware of what you were getting into at the time or was it a shock to learn wrestling was a work?

Lane: I had pretty much smartened myself up by watching it. I was kind of semi-smart. I didn't know any of the terms and I didn't know what was happening. I just kind of assumed it. I never let on because back then, at that time, the last thing you wanted to do was be a know-it-all or a smart-ass. You wanted to show respect. So I did. When he finally smartened me up, I said, "All right, whatever."

Keller: What about your athletic background before wrestling?

Lane: I concentrated mostly on the martial arts. Back in the '70s, I studied a Japanese form of karate called Shotokan for two years. Then I studied another kind of Japanese style, it was Oyama Karate. I took that for two years. I fought in tournaments for a couple of years, too. That was my main deal back then. I played football in high school. That was about it.

Keller: How much did your background in karate help you in wrestling?

Lane: Nothing really as far as wrestling moves, the actual moves. As far as flexibility, it helped me a lot. Also, mentally as far as the confidence level that I had, I wasn't afraid of the big, giant guys. I said, if it comes down to it—before I got really smartened up—I thought I could handle myself.

Keller: In your early days in Amarillo, did anything about wrestling in front of a crowd instead of a backyard surprise you?

Lane: I guess being a Leo, Leos like to be the center of attention, be in the limelight, be up on stage. I really got into it, I enjoyed it.

Keller: Did you notice fellow wrestlers who knew you were trained by Ric Flair treating you any differently than other newcomers?

Lane: I think that probably helped me out some. I remember one guy who was very nice to me—there were a lot of nice guys who helped me—but guys like Tank Patton, Bill Howard were nice to me. That may have been a direct result of Ric Flair getting me started.

Keller: Tell me about your initial trips to New Japan early in your career.

Lane: I worked there as the U.S. Jr. Heavyweight Champion against Fujinami. It was a whole lot rougher. It was more of a shoot when I first went in 1980, 1981. I was running and getting in really good shape, but I needed to get in better shape. My first match over there was a TV taping and it was almost a straight out shoot because the guys there wanted it to look good on TV. I liked it over there, but five weeks over there was a little long, especially for a first time.

Keller: From there you moved to Jarrett's Memphis territory and formed the Fabulous Ones. Are those good memories?

Lane: It was one of the highlights of my career. Steve Keirn and I set attendance records there that will probably never again be touched. I'm not bragging upon myself, that's just a fact. We were there, I want to say, for two years, maybe three years. I left there and went to work for Verne Gagne in the AWA as the Fabulous Ones against The Road Warriors. That was the first time I was ever flown across the country and wrestled in major arenas, like the Cow Palace in San Francisco, the Salt Palace in Utah. That was fun. We worked in Winnipeg, Canada quite a bit and Vancouver some. It was fun there.

We left there and went back to Jarrett's territory for about a year. We didn't get over nearly as strongly as we had before because I think the fans were still mad after the announcers buried us when we first left for turning our backs on their fans, abandoning the South, and all that. We didn't have the same clout. We stayed another six months or a year. We then went back to Florida.

Keller: When Steve Keirn quit wrestling in Florida, did you plan to wrestle singles or did you seek out a position as a tag wrestler in the NWA?

Lane: Steve decided to get out of the wrestling business. I wrestled in Florida for a while. I was in limbo and really didn't know what to do. That's when the phone rang and it was Dusty Rhodes. He was the one who gave me my first big break in Florida and here he was to give me

Jimmy and I first met in Memphis because he was a ringside photographer. Steve Keirn and I were his biggest customers. Steve and I bought our pictures from him. We're talking vast, mega-quantities of pictures from him. We probably got Jimmy set on his way to becoming a millionaire just by buying pictures from him.

another big break. They flew me in to Charlotte and they hired me to replace Dennis Condrey as a member of the Midnight Express. It was incredible timing, perfect. Jimmy Crockett sold out to Ted Turner, so we all went down to Atlanta and worked there. After leaving WCW, I worked some independents and then helped Jim Cornette pioneer Smoky Mountain Wrestling.

Keller: What do you plan to do now?

Lane: I just got back from a Gold's Gym seminar, a sales-managerial seminar. I've been talking to Ric Flair who may help me start my second career much like he helped me start my first. He's got the most successful gym here in Charlotte. His gym has been open three months and it's set attendance records already. He's got tentative plans—almost a done deal, in fact—to start pre-sales on Aug. 1 in Greensboro and the plans are for him to open his second Gold's Gym in Greensboro this fall. He and I have been discussing a deal for me as a part-owner and manager there. It's not certain, but it is a possibility. I've been thinking maybe it's the time to hang up the tights. I've been doing this professionally for 14 years and I've been lucky; I've got a lot of minor injuries, but nothing major. So maybe it's time to head off in a new career direction. I'll be 40 in August. I'm still in fantastic shape. I could certainly work another five or maybe ten years if I wanted to, but now may be a nice time to head out and try this. This could be a good career move for me.

Keller: Does your leaving the business have anything to do with unrest with the current state of wrestling or your position in the business?

Lane: I was sort of getting burned out. When I left Ted Turner, I was sort of burned out from all of the flying and being gone from home for anywhere from ten days to 16 days at a time. It's fun, it's glamorous at first, but then it starts to

wear on you. You're gone and you fly home and have to pay your bills, then you have to fly out the next day and be away from home for a long time. The money was great and that's why I did it. With Smoky Mountain Wrestling I was making these long drives, up and down mountains. Driving from Charlotte after Tommy Young was let go and when Bobby (Eaton) left again to go back to WCW, I was left to make this long, long drive alone. We're talking 700, 750 miles round trip by myself. Half of it was going up curvy mountains. I went through two sets of brakes in a year's time. My car was getting abused, not to mention my body. I was driving back home at like 4 o'clock in the morning, sometimes 5 o'clock a.m. I just decided I couldn't continue to do that. I decided I could either move up there and continue to do it or move on. I felt like it was instead time to head out in a new direction.

Keller: Were there any final events that led to you telling Cornette you were giving notice?

Lane: No, not really. He and I butted heads over money. Of course, I wanted more. Of course, him, as part-owner and promoter there wanted to pay me less. That's just the way it works. The boys want as much compensation as they can get and the promoters wanted to pay them as little as possible. No one thing set it off. I was just tired of the trips. I wanted more money if I was to stay there. He couldn't offer it, so I left.

Keller: When did you first meet Jim Cornette?

Lane: Jimmy and I first met in Memphis because he was a ringside photographer. Steve Keirn and I were his biggest customers. Steve and I bought our pictures from him. We're talking vast, mega-quantities of pictures from him. We probably got Jimmy set on his way to becoming a millionaire just by buying pictures from him. Our business relationship started there. After he had been taking pictures and doing the program and stuff, trying and trying his best to get in and be a manager, he finally got his chance to be a manager. He didn't manage me at first. I think I was managed by Jimmy Hart. The first time I was with him was with the Midnight Express.

Keller: How did your relationship change with Cornette over the years?

Lane: We never hung out as far as a social basis because he's the kind of guy who stays inside. His normal day is to sleep until 5 p.m., stay up all night long on the phone calling Dominoes and stuff like that. He hates people and everything, as far as going to nightclubs and stuff. Me, being a single guy and stuff, I'd go out and dance and meet people. In my free time I'd be out on my boat. I didn't have a lot in common socially with Jimmy, but as far as being in a car with him on a trip and stuff, he's hilarious, a fun guy.

Keller: Did you ever feel overwhelmed by

him, always being on the road with him or was he always fresh and fun to be around?

Lane: He's a fun guy. He's got a great sense of humor. He and I, I think, working for Ted Turner there the final few years, '88 through '90, he and I both were getting so burned out. He would snap—not at me and Bobby—but he would go on a rental car agent or someone in the airport, a cab driver. He could cuss them out, scream at them, berate them, being fully aware of the fact that if the guy started to beat him up, Bobby and I would save him. He was a really tough guy (laughs). He was getting so stressed out, probably caused by him being put on the bookkeeping committee. He was doing almost everything. I wasn't given credit for it, but he was doing it all. He was staying up late nights, doing the TV stuff and all the stuff. When he went off on people, it was a stressful situation.

Keller: Did your relationship with Cornette change a lot when he became your boss at SMW? Did Cornette change?

Lane: Cornette didn't change, as far as his personality. He was fun to be with. He was under a little more stress, especially during TV taping days. He was doing the entire thing. He was in charge of everything there. He actually needed help. He needs assistants and stuff. He didn't go from being a nice guy to jerk. But still, the major thing with him was apparently his financial backer or backers, or whatever the case may be were either putting the squeeze on him or he was making it seem like they were. He was trying to cut salaries. A lot of guys were just happy to be there because besides that place, there's no where to go other than the WWF, WCW, and Memphis. A lot of guys there have never been asked by the major promotions to work there. They were just happy to have a job there. They have a bunch of great workers there, and they'll work hard. Me, being I guess more of a star, I just felt like I was worth a little more than he was willing to pay me. He and I didn't see eye to eye on the financial aspect of it, but besides that, he didn't change a lot.

Keller: Can you give me a ballpark figure of what you wanted and what he was willing to pay?

Lane: We dropped from a more or less six figure income from Jim Crockett and at Turner. I think I was making a lot more than just about anybody there, except for Kevin Sullivan and what I call major league players like Paul Orndorff and Arn (Anderson). They were making good money. When their money got cut, they left.

Keller: What was the weekly pay for the major league guys?

Lane: I think the highest paid guys were making around \$500 a week, others in the \$300 range. The vast majority of guys there were down to a \$150, \$125 range.

Keller: I can imagine spending that much

money in expenses alone.

Lane: It's very hard. If you don't stay there, out the only other place to go is Jerry Jarrett's promotion and he's not paying anything, like \$25 a night or \$50 a night. That's an insult to me. The main thing is babyface guys make good money selling gimmicks.

Keller: Is there any pooling of that? If you're top heel and just as over as the top babyface, you won't make nearly as much money as the babyface, right?

Lane: There is no pooling. You make a whole lot less money (as a heel).

Keller: Does that create heat? Do a lot of guys want to wrestle as babyfaces?

Lane: A lot of guys don't enjoy working as babyfaces. I don't think there's a lot of heat because of it. I think there probably should be some kind of a (pooling) deal. I mentioned it to him once. His retaliation was, "Well, Stan, when you and Steve were babyfaces in Memphis, you guys were making a lot of money on gimmicks and the heels weren't." My comeback to that was, "Yeah, Jimmy, but at that point the houses were all doing great and everybody was making good money." His comeback was, "Yeah, well, if we'd start selling out, it'd be great." My comeback was, "Our houses are drawing well. Some of the major towns weren't, but his spot shows were doing really good. If we're doing this good, why aren't we making more money?" He said, "We're just starting out, so stick with us a little while. Sacrifice now and if we get things going, the next year or the year after that, we'll all be making money." And I said, "Yeah, but I may not be here next year." It was an ongoing point-counterpoint. It was like, "Stan Lane, you ignorant slut." (laughs)

Keller: Was there a "team player" mentality among the wrestlers of "sacrifice now for the long-term benefit of the promotion?" Or was it, "I want mine and then to get out of here as fast as I can?"

Lane: I think a lot of the guys were just happy to have a full-time job there. They just love the business.

Keller: Do they see SMW as a necessary step or a career and a place to still be in three or four years?

Lane: I think the majority of the guys there want to remain there. They probably enjoy being a big fish in a small pond as opposed to being a small fish in a big pond. They're like stars there. It's fun for them, probably.

Keller: Have you done any work in male stripping or nightclubs?

Lane: That was just a rumor that was spurred by me doing some male dancing when I first quit Turner back in the winter of 1990 and the spring and summer of '91. Besides preparing myself for this fitness job, I've gotten myself involved in

several commercials. I'm also going to be in a movie that starts filming July 17. It's a smaller movie that's going to be shot in South Carolina. It hasn't been titled yet, but it's about dirt bikes, motor cross. I've got a small part with dialogue. That will be fun for me. I'm also doing a thing for Ric Flair. Every Wednesday night I'm the M.C. for the Miss Hawaiian Tropic Bikini Contest. I love that. That's the ideal job for me. If I could do that every day and every night and get paid big money for it, I'd be happy the rest of my life. I'm out there, doing my D.J. voice. I say, "We've got the hottest girls here in the Southeast, Miss Hawaiian Tropic." It is the world's largest bikini contest. All of the girls here in Charlotte, after the finals at the end of July, the regional winners will be flown down to Ft. Lauderdale, Fla. for the national finals. Me and Ric and all of us are going to fly down for that. Then the national winner in Ft. Lauderdale will be flown to Melbourne, Australia for the international finals. It's a major league type of deal. It's a lot of fun. We average anywhere from 12 to 15 girls per week. It's the most beautiful girls in the area. They drive in from as far away as Ashville, Columbia, Spartanburg, Greenville. It's great, and I meet them all.

Keller: Lets segue into a question about the road life of some of the wrestlers. Was there a looming fear of AIDS or other diseases among wrestlers, and if so, did that fear grow during the last several years when AIDS has become so widespread, not just in the hotels after the matches, but also in the ring when bleeding took place?

Lane: That concerns me now as far as blading and stuff. I was never in my entire career a big fan of that anyway. You can probably tell by my head. It was for years and years a necessary evil. I've just gotten paranoid about it the past several years with AIDS and stuff. As far as the sexual aspect of it, you just have to be careful and practice safe sex. You can have just as much sex, just do it safely... I don't think there was a lot of talk about AIDS, condoms, and stuff. It was just the male bonding sort of stuff, like "how many you're going to have" or "who the lucky girl was going to be tonight." It wasn't like, "I'm gonna take these three girls up to my room and I've got plenty of condoms for them." It wasn't like that. I think the whole atmosphere of it changed. I remember in the early '80s B.A.—before AIDS—there were some really wild parties. I think the parties—I'm not saying there was group sex going on, but let's just say the really wild parties that went on all night long almost ceased. People thought this just isn't going to work. It slowed down to more one-on-one stuff with just as much veracity as ever, just with condoms. All the wild parties just ceased overnight.

Keller: I want to run down a few names you've run across over the years and get your honest appraisal of them, both in terms of their involvement in wrestling and what you think of

them personally. Let's start with Jim Crockett.

Stan Lane: I liked Jim. He signed us to our biggest contract ever. Even though it was only about three months later that he sold out, and we only got the super big money for a short time. I recall sitting in his office in Charlotte and hearing him say, "Yeah, I think \$220,000 a year would be adequate." I almost sh— my pants. I went from Florida making \$450 to \$850 a week to making \$225,000 a year. I thought I was going to be a damn millionaire. Then three months later he sold out and went bankrupt, so I had to settle for 40 cents on the dollar.

Keller: Was 40 cents on the dollar about equal to what you would have settled for anyway?

Lane: It probably was (laughs). I think I've got a picture of that contract somewhere.

Keller: Did you lose any respect for Jim Crockett because of his negotiating style?

Lane: I think, basically, he got wrapped up in the glamour and glitz of having the biggest promotion in the world. I think he got wrapped up in it and went out and bought a jet, a 9 passenger falcon jet and a G-1 Gulf Stream airplane. We were flying around, it was the ultimate. It was like we were rock stars. He got wrapped up in that and I don't think he realized he was spending more than he was actually making. It just kind of caught up to him, snuck up on him and slapped him in the face, saying, "You're gonna go under."

Keller: Was he a good promoter to work for on a day-to-day basis? Was he fair in the way he operated?

Lane: Yeah, I guess he was. He wasn't a people person. He wasn't a guy with a real bubbly personality, but if he liked you, he was nice to you. I liked him. He didn't walk up to you and slap you on the back and say, "Yeah, you're doing a great job. Everything's going good." He was a more introverted type of guy. For a long time he had a successful operation.

Keller: What about Bill Watts?

Lane: As far as personality goes, Watts was the exact opposite (of Crockett). He was a loud, forceful, macho kind of guy. He liked guys who were athletes, who were tough, that kind of stuff. He wasn't the easiest guy to work for if you minded getting screamed at some. If you could handle that, he was fine, too.

Keller: Was he fair to work for?

Lane: He was fair. I worked for him nine months. He was a little bit abrasive with you. A lot of guys resented that, like being talked down to and being screamed at. If you could get past that, you could handle him just fine.

Keller: What about Jerry Jarrett?

Lane: Jerry Jarrett I liked a whole lot. He has a very good head for what the fans would like. He probably gave more guys the proper gimmick

In all honesty, Flair definitely loves being who he is. He loves the Nature Boy gimmick. That's him. I think when he does finally retire, if he does, he's going to definitely miss that. For me, I could hang it up now and it's not going to kill me to not be "Sweet Stan." I think his persona of the Nature Boy being the champ, he will definitely miss that.

back then. He started the Rock & Roll Express, which originally started as a B-team version of The Fabulous Ones. He gave Hulk Hogan his gimmick. And Kamala's. He was the first guy to employ the use of rock-style videos.

Keller: You were in the first one, right?

Lane: Yes. That's what got us over so strongly. He made them sexy. Sex sells. He was very successful doing that. He's been around a long time. His promotion now I don't think is doing all that great. Just being in the same territory on a weekly basis and being there so much, to have survived this long is phenomenal.

Keller: Did Jarrett have more integrity than other promoters you've worked for?

Lane: Promoters are going to be promoters. When it comes down to it, they're out to make as much money as possible for themselves. Their second priority is paying the boys. You gotta just accept that as a fact of life. He wasn't any better or any worse than any of them.

Keller: What about Verne Gagne?

Lane: Verne was isolated up there in his own northern, midwestern area so long, I think he was in some kind of a time warp. He was so highly successful for such a long time because he had no competition. When Vince and Ted Turner started this cable stuff with their national shows, I think his fans and his viewers finally got to see what these big league guys were doing with all of their glitz and glamour, it more or less killed him. When Steve and I got there, he was still shooting his TV in a warehouse kind of building with two or three rows of fans. His fans started seeing TBS and Vince with all of these big arenas and the fireworks and lights. His fans said, "Wow, we've been missing this for a long time." He didn't keep up with the times.

Keller: What was it like working with The Road Warriors?

Lane: It was all right. They were so strong. They liked us, so there was never anything done intentionally to hurt us. They were so much bigger and stronger than we were, they could just manhandle us.

Keller: Were there times you wished they sold more for you because you were the babyfaces and they were the heels?

Lane: Yeah. Sure. It was just one of those things. They were still fairly green. Steve and I worked against them in Memphis. They were selling big time for us. When we got up there in their home town, they must have had pals there, it was a different story. They didn't want to sell as much. It was a pride thing, an ego thing. It wasn't that bad.

Keller: What about Dusty Rhodes?

Lane: I owe him a lot. He gave me my first break and my second, biggest break. I'm not sure which gimmick was bigger, which one I drew more money with, The Fabulous Ones or The Midnight Express, but Dusty Rhodes was always around to bring me in and give me a shot with them.

Keller: Did you feel you had to fill his ego more so than dealing with other wrestlers and promoters?

Lane: That's hard to say. Guys who have been on top and had the fans' adulation and had the big money, it's kind of hard to hang it up. Some guys have a hard time doing it. The last thing I would say is he has an ego problem, because we all do, really. It's just a matter of how you handle it.

Keller: What about Bobby Eaton?

Lane: He's just a super guy. I don't think there's a single guy in the business who will badmouth Bobby. He's just a down-to-earth, genuine guy. He was a family man, he loved his kids. He was a fantastic worker in the ring.

Keller: What is it that makes Bobby tick? Were there ever times when you saw another side to Bobby other than the quiet, reserved version of his personality?

Lane: He basically is just a shy person. Bobby loves to laugh. If you get him out with a couple of laughs, he'll party with you and laugh.

Keller: What about Tom Prichard?

Lane: He's not really a whole lot different from Bobby. He's a great worker, but a quiet type of guy, too. He's somewhat of an introvert, really. Then, the same thing, you get him out in the bar and he's hilarious. He loves to have fun, he loves to party.

Keller: Was there anybody in the business whom you dealt with who you had a really strong disliking for?

Lane: No, not really. I was fortunate. I guess with me, I never tried to make the other guys think I was a tough guy, sort of, "I'm a lover, not a fighter. I'm just here to work and make money." I just wanted to get in, have a good match, and get

out. I think where guys have their problems and animosity is when you've got two guys who think they're tough and have an ego problem, thinking a guy isn't giving them enough, they're not looking good. I wasn't like that.

Keller: What were your feelings when you saw the wrestling landscape change from a lot of territories to fewer and fewer full-time promotions to the point wrestling has reached today?

Lane: I liked the old days better. I guess I'm part of the old school. I thought it was a whole lot better then. You had a bunch of territories to choose from. If you only have two spots to go to to make money, you are at a distinct disadvantage to promoters.

Keller: Do you have any plans to reenter wrestling?

Lane: I got a call from Japan this past week. I was sitting here a month ago thinking it was a done deal, I'm gonna hang up the boots and tight. I'm gonna get a hair cut, which I got, and I'm gonna go into the corporate world. Now, I'm getting a call from them. Now I'm not sure what I'm going to do. As far as working in the States, I think I'm done. But if I got a lucrative Japan offer for maybe six or twelve weeks a year, I might be tempted. Then again, if I'm involved in the day to day operations of a gym, it's going to be hard to take off and go over there. I've got some major decisions to make in the next month. That's the way life is. Nothing is simple.

Keller: What about longterm goals? Do you see yourself living the same lifestyle in ten or twenty years?

Lane: I want to eventually settle down. It's kind of strange, being 39 years old, I never fell in love with anybody until this past year. That didn't pan out. It started out great, but then we argued all the time. Besides that, I've seen so many of my friends who have had failed marriages. It seems 90 percent of all marriages in the past five years have failed. I'm thinking, things have changed. My parents have been married 41 years. Couples now-a-days, if things don't pan out, it's no big deal. Every one of my cousins are divorced. I know hundreds of wrestlers who have had failed marriages. Some guys have had several failed marriages. I'm kind of a non-trusting kind of guy. If I do settle down, I want to make sure it's the real thing. I don't want to get into it and then get out of it and lose all of my stuff that I've worked so hard for. Then again, better yet, I can marry a really rich girl. It's funny, if I go take this Gold's Gym job in Greensboro, I'll be going back to my hometown. We'll have gone full circle. It will have taken 14 years. I will have left Greensboro in January '79 and it would be great to go back home because Mom and Dad are getting on up there in age, so I could see them and take care of them more. It may just work out to be perfect.

JERRY LAWLER

Jerry Lawler, known as the "King of Memphis wrestling," has had one heck of a year. He joined the WWF in an unexpected move, went on to become a major player in that organization, and then was unceremoniously dropped from a major angle due to being indicted on charges he had sex with an underage girl. Now he has played musical chairs with USWA partner Jerry Jarrett, who has moved to Stamford to work full time for the WWF in the front office. In this interview conducted December 6, 1993, Lawler discusses his thoughts on the future of the USWA and his stay in the WWF.

Wade Keller: What is the future of the USWA and now that Jerry Jarrett is working full-time for the WWF, how has your role in the USWA changed?

Jerry Lawler: I don't really see it changing. We've always shared duties here. One of us was doing all and the other was doing basically nothing anyway. It was always that way. Either he'd be in charge or I'd be in charge. We used to actually set a time frame on how long we would each run things. We first started doing it one time for six months each. Then we'd switch at the end of six months no matter what. Then one time everything was going really well so we decided not to switch as scheduled. So then we started switching over once a year. Things have been



Jerry Lawler

Photo by WK

pretty much run a certain way. The place almost runs itself.

Keller: What is the process like running the USWA from a Saturday-to-Saturday cycle?

Lawler: We're probably one of the only places left that still runs weekly cities. So there are advantages and disadvantages to doing it. One of the advantages is it doesn't involve long range planning. In that respect you don't run into some problems you may have, like in the WWF where they may have the main event for Royal Rumble already figured out who's gonna be in it. Then, by the time the Royal Rumble gets here, one of those guys may not even still be in the WWF. On a week-to-week basis, you pretty much know who's gonna be here at least by the next week.

The process just continually keeps going. Let's start on Saturday at TV, you can lay out pretty much the lay out and figure out the TV as last-minute as you want to or as early in the week as you want to. Just figure who you're going to have there and what your TV matches are going to be. Nobody really needs that until Saturday morning at the TV stations.

From the TV show, you go on to the Monday night card. Then we take that 90 minute live show, we edit it down to an hour. It is then shown the following week in Louisville, Evansville, Nashville, Atlanta, and some other different cities. Then you can book a week ahead and follow the same storylines that you had on TV or that you had in Memphis into Louisville and Nashville and Evansville.

We run weekly shows in Memphis on Mondays, Louisville on Tuesdays, Evansville on Wednesdays, and Nashville on Saturdays.

Keller: When you're on the road, are there often glitches that throw a wrench into the process?

Lawler: No. Things run really smooth. We seldom have problems. You don't really have big major surprises. The guys are in the towns every night.

Keller: Does it get monotonous having no major wrenches get thrown in? Is it too patterned and predictable?

Lawler: No, it's a plus. Anything can be corrected within a couple of days. You're always just a few days away from TV. For instance, we've put a lot of time into Rex Hargrove and had been featuring him and everything and he just all of a sudden last Tuesday in Louisville showed up and, like Mr. Perfect, said, "I've got some personal problems at home with my wife. This is the first time I've ever been away from home for an extended period of time." That kind of stuff happens. He had to leave that day. It was fixable by Saturday.

Keller: Are wrestlers, given the USWA's current attendance and the general state of the industry, able to sustain a living or do they use it as a side job?

Lawler: They're able to make a living. The reason this is so unique as far as every other part of the country is that the economy here is different than any other part of the United States. It costs less money to live here and to be on the road. It's nothing compared to the Northeast or out West. Everybody makes less money, consequently everything costs less. It's all relative. The guys are able to get by. Certainly nobody's getting rich right now. There can be a time when things just go fairly well that you can make and save some money because it's so inexpensive to get by right now.

Keller: What is the typical reason somebody comes to you and says they want to work for the USWA?

Lawler: We get a ton of calls and tapes all the time from wrestlers who want to come in. Our problem is that we are a business just like anybody else. There's space here for some guys who want to break into the business and want to just get better and want to move on to bigger and better things. By the same token, we have to keep in mind that we have to stay in business, too, and we have to have some guys in here that are looking to learn, but are guys who are capable of drawing some money for us. I think that since so many of our main guys have actually been born and raised in this territory like Jeff (Jarrett), Brian Christopher, and I—this is our home—that's the only reason this territory has survived.

If you look at the other territories, most of those guys who were really not loyal to the territory, so to speak, as soon as they got the opportunity, they went right up to the WWF or to WCW. It left most of the territories with the situation that I was talking about. It left them with just guys who wanted to break into the business and wanted to move on to bigger and better things. And not necessarily capable of putting people into the seats.

Keller: Do you expect talent that comes into the USWA for seasoning and experience to leave for bigger promotions eventually, or do you resent that?

Lawler: I don't fault anybody for wanting to move on. Eventually that's the best for us, too. You don't want somebody to just... The only reason that I've been able to stay so long, and Jeff, and Brian, and everything, is because we have constantly changed the other faces around us. If you had a situation where you had a whole territory of guys homesteading, so to speak, then they would eventually all get stale and you'd quit drawing that way, too, no matter how good they were.

Keller: Is Jerry Jarrett ever in town now?

Lawler: Yes. As a matter of fact, I just got off the phone with him. I hadn't talked to him in quite a while. He's back in Stamford now, but he comes into Nashville every week.

Keller: But he's not doing anything in the USWA now?

Lawler: Exactly, but like I said, that's the way we have always run it. When I was doing the stuff up there with the WWF, it was basically like being full time with the exception of working Memphis and everything. He was doing everything to run the show then and it was no problem.

Keller: Do you expect the USWA will or could look the same four years from now or do you expect the face of wrestling will change enough where there will be major changes?

Lawler: I think we can stay the same. The main reason is we haven't really tried to change. If you look at most of the other promotions, it seems like they all tried to gear up and emulate the WWF or WCW. That just can't be done on a regional basis. You have to sell the people a whole different concept. They are able to sell national superstars to people. People will come just to see the big stars. I think the people look at us in a different light and I think rightly so. We're not getting the national exposure. The wrestlers here are not superstars. What we sell them in place of that is action and violence and a storyline that they can continue to come back to week after week. We sell them a whole different form of entertainment. A little wilder. I think you and I talked about this before. People will run outside and break their necks to see two guys fighting, whether they're two big guys or two little guys. They don't have to know who they are or anything. People just like to see a good fight, anytime. I think we try a little harder to convince them that these guys are really fighting down here as opposed to what they're doing in the WWF. The WWF doesn't have to do that because they have the big-name stars.

Keller: Do you sense that the fans who are attending your shows believe more so than WWF fans in the Northeast?

Lawler: I think those fans look at wrestling in a different light than do our fans down here. I think our fans are (less skeptical).

Keller: For the record, what is your current standing with the WWF given the statutory rape charge against you?

Lawler: Well, I guess it would officially be called "on hiatus." I totally understand it. This is the biggest mess I've ever been involved with in my life. This turns my life and everybody that I know and my family and everybody you come in contact with, it can turn your life upside down. You know, there's certainly a stigma connected with it immediately. I've realized all of a sudden you don't hear from people or people don't want to be associated with you and that sort of thing. I can understand that. This makes you a little wiser and you realize who your friends are and who believes you and that sort of thing. I just hope that it will get the attention and publicity when everybody finds out it was all just a big joke that

it did when they thought it was the real deal.

Keller: Do you have interest in returning to the WWF?

Lawler: Oh sure.

Keller: Is that something you're eager to return to doing?

Lawler: Well, I'm not going to say I didn't enjoy part of it. I really enjoyed the part that I originally agreed to go up there and do, and that was the commentary and the television stuff. I certainly didn't enjoy being on the road and I'll tell anybody that. I don't like that anymore. I've had enough of that in my life. I hate motel rooms, I don't like sitting in them. I don't like being in airports. That's just about all you do up there. The last couple months there, I worked 15 days out of the month for them and the rest of the days I was working up here.

Keller: If you went up there to do television commentary, how did you end up being on the road almost full time?

Lawler: You tell me. (laughs) I still haven't figured it out.

Keller: Did they just walk up to you and say, "Jerry, we want you on the road. We've invested all this time in you and are you interested in some extra pay?" and you said, "Well, I guess."

Lawler: That was sort of it. (laughs)

Keller: I was actually there when the conversation took place. I eavesdropped.

Lawler: Yeah, you know more than I do.

Keller: This was the first time you had been with either of the two national promotions and you went over really well. Did that surprise you in any way how well you went over nationally?

Lawler: Well, yeah, it did surprise me really. I'm one of the guys—I don't know if I was that over or not. I know that response seemed really good as far as what we were looking for, you know. But I think, I don't know, it was sort of the right situation at the right time. Or maybe I made it into the right situation. I don't know.

It was really easy, in some ways, to do what they're lacking up there. It's personal issues. We had a personal issue up there between Bret Hart and me that the people could really relate to. They could put themselves into either one of our positions and say, "Yeah, I'd be hot too and I'd really want to fight that guy." I think people get so tired—they've seen so much wrestling—it's hard to get them involved in anything that happens that is just wrestling. A guy getting into the ring and beating on another guy because he's jealous that he's got the belt or something like that. Boy, that's tough nowadays. People have seen so much of it. But when they realize that somebody's family has been insulted—it just all came about so naturally and real. Even though I had never been in the mainstream, I think most people had heard of me over a period of

twenty-something years that I was "the king wrestling." It was a natural and believable thing. Anybody would be offended if they had spent years building their career up and building the name up and somebody then came along and infringed on it or tried to take it over. The fact could really relate to it. That's how the personal issue got started and then it just escalated into family insults and that sort of thing.

Keller: Did you think the personal insult you levied against Stu and Helen Hart even went too far? Were you ever uncomfortable with what you were saying?

Lawler: Not at all. As a matter of fact, I would have gone further with them. If you really dislike somebody and you were really trying to insult them, you're certainly not going to think "Now, can I go too far in insulting this guy?"

Keller: The reason I ask is that you don't see a personal issue taken to that extreme very often in pro wrestling?

Lawler: Some of the stuff we did that never got to air was really going to be even better. It was the stuff leading up to the Survivor Series (where I interviewed Harvey Whippleman and Johnny Polk who were dressed like Stu and Helen Hart).

Keller: From what I heard of that interview segment, it was much better than the skit with Shawn Michaels that replaced it.

Lawler: I'm certainly not one to tell them how to run their business, but I would have just backed off that thing completely and then got four big-name guys to go against the Harts. I think it was really lacking when they continued on with the Knights.

Keller: Now that you've seen how the organization operates up close, what do you think are the keys now for the WWF being successful in the future?

Lawler: I really don't know. From the very first time I was up there, I was just really, really impressed with what a well-run operation it was. I had never been around anything that big and that involved. There are so many things that go into that with all the merchandising, all the overseas stuff, all the advertising and publicity—it's a massive operation. It just amazes me that it can be run as well as it is.

I think wrestling is a cyclical type of thing. I don't think it will ever die. It will always have its ups and downs. I think there might be an up period on the horizon. It will eventually go back down again. I don't know if it will ever hit the heights that it was a few years back, but it may. I seriously really, honestly believe the only thing it's suffering from is still overexposure.

Keller: I think that's being solved with cancellations.

Lawler: That's right. See, it takes care of itself. It's like nature.

Keller: What did you take back to Memphis with you from your stay in the WWF? Did you learn anything or become inspired by anything you saw?

Lawler: I was inspired and saw some things I would like to do, but just to be perfectly honest with you, we don't have the money to do it.

Keller: What would you do with a larger budget?

Lawler: More advertising. It's to a point now where we just depend on our TV show. Of course, now, in watching the WWF, they're trying to cut back a little bit and they're getting into that frame of mind, too. We just depend solely on our TV show to let the people know from week to week what's going on. That's why we have to go along the storyline thing, almost the soap opera thing, where we get the people involved in certain personalities so they want to tune in every week and follow their life. Because that's the only way—if they're tuned in—that they're going to find out about our matches. I would like to be able to have more money to go out and just blitz the area with radio advertising, newspapers to let the people who may for one reason or another not get to see the show this week know we still have matches going on and what's going to be there.

Keller: Was there anything that really surprised you about how the WWF was run?

Lawler: I guess it reinforced and made me sort of reopen my eyes that you can take almost anybody and make what you want out of them. They're the masters at that. They've taken some guys that we've had down here and really didn't use that much or see much potential in and turned them into something that looks like a big superstar. I think that's probably possible with just about anybody.

Keller: Name some wrestlers who have come through the USWA who you didn't think would make it big and surprised you by drawing money? On the flip side, were there any you thought would make it and didn't?

Lawler: That's really hard. I don't know if that's fair to say and I don't even know if I could say. I don't really look at people and judge people by saying, "Aw, this person will never make it." We are limited here as to the number of people we see. Just to give you one example, look at Harvey Wippleman, or Downtown Bruno. Here is a little guy I let basically get into the business simply to stop him from calling me so much. He would call and bug me so much wanting to get booked as a manager. I remember it like yesterday. I told Randy Hales, "Look, call that guy back. Give him a start date. We can bring him in and finish him up in two weeks. Then he'll quit calling because we can tell him, 'Hey, we tried. That's it.'" Now, here he is, he's been around for years and he's up in the WWF doing really well.

Keller: You talk about the cycles this

business goes through. Is there anything that can be done to speed up those cycles to get attendance in Memphis back up to three-thousand?

Lawler: (laughs) I would be trying it if it was an easy answer. I think it will come around. I look just in the TV guide that came out the other day. Now, if you don't have cable, ours is the only show you can see now. Memphis only has about 45 percent cable coverage. There used to be four other shows on.

Keller: Now that the WWF isn't on the broadcast airwaves in Memphis and they don't bring live shows to Memphis anymore, do you see the current landscape almost half way back to being territories?

Lawler: I think that climate is starting to return. You see, the TV people are the key to this and they're behind. I think the ratings are almost a year behind what the feeling of the public is. They were about a year late on sensing that wrestling was really hot. Then they glutted out the market with it. They're about a year late on sensing that it's been overexposed. They will be about a year late in realizing people want to see wrestling again in local markets.

In other words, if you went to someplace where there used to be a territory and tried to get wrestling on the local stations, they'd say, "Man, we just threw wrestling off. Nobody watches wrestling anymore." So it will take a while before that climate changes, but it's on its way there.

Keller: Can a regional promotion like the USWA peacefully co-exist with a Northeastern promotion called the WWF which happens to be seen nationally on USA?

Lawler: Certainly it can. Unless they came in and invaded your territory and said, "We're going to run that as much as you guys do with live shows," I think that would be the only detrimental thing.

Keller: As you look at the way things are going now, are the doors open for more regional full-time promotions to start up?

Lawler: The only thing they'll find trouble with right now is what I said a moment ago, finding TV exposure. It is going to take a while for those TV people to come around and say, "Yeah, we'll put your show back on." There's so many other factors. Things change from day to day. For instance, the influx of the infomercials. All of those infomercials will pay top dollar for that time as opposed to most wrestling shows, which need to be on in a barter-type situation, especially in a regional territory type thing. Anything other than that, they just can't afford it. Most of these stations will say, "Why should I barter something when I can sell it?"

Keller: Is there a chance the USWA will work with SMW? Has that been discussed?

Lawler: Not really. They've sent us some guys down here. Jimmy (Cornette) has said that guys

aren't booked with him, they're welcome to work anywhere. That's a good thing. That's the way it used to always be and I think that's the way it should be once again. One of the worst things that ever happened to wrestling was the contracts, but they were a necessary evil. The bigger the business got, the promoters had to be protected. I guess they felt that was the only way. I think that changed the whole face of wrestling and hurt in one respect. It certainly hurt in the movement of wrestlers and made the wrestlers who were in one territory get stale faster. I think that eventually led to the downfall of a lot of territories.

Keller: Do you still look forward to doing what you do or do you do what you do because you're good enough at it to do it efficiently? Is burn-out a factor or are you still excited every Saturday morning?

Lawler: I'm still really excited. I love it. You know the old saying, "Find a job you love and you'll never have to work a day in your life." I really feel that I've been so fortunate in doing that. I love putting the TV together. I love watching it materialize in front of my eyes. I love being in the ring. I love the wrestling. The only part I dislike is the travelling, getting to and from all of this.

Keller: Is it frustrating dealing with a small budget or do you see that more as a positive challenge?

Lawler: It's a little bit of both. It's frustrating in the fact that you can't help but think in the back of your mind, "Gosh, this would be a lot easier if we just spent a little bit more money." Also, it's a challenge to see how many people we can put in here without more money since we don't have more money to spend.

Keller: Compare the availability of qualified talent today compared to two, five, or fifteen years ago.

Lawler: Guys are guys. I think the mentality of it has changed a little bit in the fact that most of them think about getting a gimmick before they think about learning to wrestle.

Keller: Going back eight or ten years, you could look at your territory and pick out a third or half of the wrestlers who were or would go on to be drawing cards elsewhere. Today, do you see that as still the case?

Lawler: I think a lot of the people will be in and out of the business. There are some guys here who have potential to move on to bigger and better things. There's some guys who show up every day. All of a sudden Saturday (Dec. 11), I was really excited after TV was over because, gosh, it was exciting. There were new faces and they all did good. There were no major screw-ups. There's always going to be guys coming in.

It's so funny. I remember back when I first started, this territory was doing big business. I

two, but certainly not the guys in the main event—the promoters wouldn't even use them today; that's how different it was. The difference was, the people didn't know any different. They didn't see anyone else to compare them to. Al Green versus Jackie Fargo was selling out the Mid-South Coliseum because Al Green went on there and said, "You're a coward and your daddy's a coward." Fargo said, "Well, my daddy's dead. You don't say nothing bad about my daddy." Green replied, "Well your old dead daddy's a coward." And they sold out. Al Green? You'd have to search hard to find a worse wrestler. No offense to Al. It was just the charisma, the personal issue, and they didn't have anybody else to compare him with.

Keller: How many more years are you going to do this, either behind the scenes or in front of the camera?

Lawler: This is something I think I can do for a long time both ways. Even if you don't actively get in the ring and wrestle. Look at Mr. Fuji. (laughs) I think I'm blessed with enough of a quick wit and enough of a communications ability that I could do something on camera in terms of managing or behind the mic for a long time.

Keller: Are there other options you've considered if you're not in wrestling?

Lawler: I don't even think about it.

Keller: What's the current status of the USWA's talent exchange agreement with the WWF?

Lawler: It's on hold right now pending the outcome of (my legal) situation.

Keller: In terms of that deal, do think it has been a benefit to the USWA?

Lawler: I tried to look at it. I don't think it's made any difference. Last week was the first week we didn't have any guys (with WWF exposure) on the card and we had more people than we've had in weeks. Of course, we did a little deal where it was fan appreciation night and we had children in for two bucks. The money wasn't as good, but we had more people than usual. We had something like 1,600, maybe more.

Keller: Was there any negative effect in your opinion to having WWF guys come in and out, in and out?

Lawler: I think it was handled as well as possible. I think the one area where it was a positive effect—I talked earlier how a lot of people look at those people as superstars—I think it helped elevate the perception of our guys as even with theirs.

Keller: What do you think of Jerry Jarrett going to the WWF full time? Are you excited for him?

Lawler: I think it's good. I think he'll get real tired real fast, though. I know I did. Jerry's older

I think it was made to sound so much worse than it was when the only way it's reported is, "Jerry Lawler is charged with rape." In actuality it's a case of a young girl who goes to wrestling who claimed to a friend she had sex with Jerry Lawler.

than I am. We're used to the laid back Tennessee lifestyle. Brother, it's night and day from that up there. I haven't really talked to him too much. The most I've heard so far is that he's still observing.

Keller: Is there anything regarding the rape allegations against you that you want on the record that hasn't been stated thus far?

Lawler: Other than the fact that I don't think the people ever got to hear what it was. I think it was made to sound so much worse than it was when the only way it's reported is, "Jerry Lawler is charged with rape." When in actuality it's just a case of a young girl who goes to wrestling who claimed to a friend of hers that she had sex with Jerry Lawler. I mean, how many groupies or girls who go to wrestling have claimed to have had sex with the wrestlers? Millions. And then this just got told to the wrong individual.

The prosecutor now I think is just in a situation where it's one of two things. Either they don't want to look like they've got egg on their faces or they want to try to make a name for themselves with a high-profile case, here. But one way or another, I don't see how they have a case here. Nothing ever happened, there's no physical evidence, the girl has admitted nothing ever happened, I maintained from the beginning nothing ever happened, and from that I cannot see how there is a case. But those people can do absolutely anything they want to do. I got a call from Dana Kirk, the old Memphis State coach, who got entangled in a situation with them and wound up having to go to jail for four months. He said, "Jerry, they can do anything they want to."

Keller: Is that something you are considering as a possibility or are you confident it will blow over?

Lawler: I still have faith in the—I don't know if I have faith in the legal system, but I still have faith in the concept of right over wrong. I cannot see how something like this could go further, but then again, I can't see how it got this far. I can't imagine somebody having to go to jail for something like this that never took place. Oh man, it's just amazing.

REFLECTIONS

Jerry Lynn: Jerry Lynn and Sean Waltman (1-2-3 Kid) wrestled each other often on the Minnesota indy scene in the early '90s. Both were seen as being on a path toward bigger things in the business. As I write this, their paths appear to be ready to cross again as Lynn works for WCW as Mr. J.L. while Waltman is headed in to WCW to be a member of the NWO. Waltman's career has progressed further faster than Lynn's and he appears to have a better future.

Lynn, though, has stuck it out over the long run, despite telling people he's quitting the business off and on over the years. He worked in Japan, but that doesn't appear to be a place where he'll spend years making a full-time living. As he talks about in this early Torch Talk, there aren't a lot of places to earn a full time living.

Lynn worked briefly for the USWA and talks about the positives and negatives of that experience. He also talks about his dreams for the future and what he thinks his road blocks will be.

It was a rudimentary Torch Talk that gave a picture of some of the things a young wrestler goes through to establish himself.

Madusa: Madusa had a lot to talk about when this Torch Talk took place. She had just left WCW under less than happy circumstances. She worked under Bill Watts and had a lot to say about that and the WCW corporate environment.

As one of the most successful women wrestlers of the last ten years in the U.S., she more than anyone has the experience to talk about the limitations and road blocks she faced in her struggle to earn a full time living in the pro wrestling business.

Having wrestled in so many areas—including the AWA, WCW, and Japan—she was able to compare various areas and how women were treated in a mostly male-oriented business. It was a pleasure to interview Madusa because she seemed open to talking about everyone she crossed paths with, and while she wasn't overly negative about many of them which leads to suspicions of sugar-coating, her comments on each person did provide insight into who they were and what made them tick.

Since the interview she has wrestled for the WWF and then left only to show up in WCW and dump the WWF ladies' title in the garbage can on live television. She is now the WCW Women's Champion.

Dutch Mantell: Now working for the WWF as Zebekiah, Mantell is one of the more underutilized wits in the business. His color commentary on WCW WorldWide with Tony Schiavone a few years back and more recently in SMW was praised on many fronts. In this interview he talked about his approach to color commentary, plus why he doesn't enjoy being in the business as much as he used to. He came across as an up front guy just trying to make an honest living and enjoy himself.

JERRY LYNN

Every pro wrestler had a first day of training camp. Every wrestler had a first match. Every wrestler had a first road trip. And every wrestler has stories to tell about those first few years. Some wrestlers do not make it past those first few pages while others go on to be full-time, well-known national stars. In the following "Torch Talk" interview conducted with Jerry Lynn on March 9, 1991, he talks about the above moments. Lynn has been wrestling less than three years and shows promise as one of the best new workers in wrestling. He recently returned from working the USWA circuit for a couple of months. Jerry Lynn returns to the PWA on Mar. 18 at George's Nightclub in Fridley, Minn.

Wade Keller: When did you first consciously think of becoming a pro wrestler? Was it a dream growing up as a fan of wrestling?

Jerry Lynn: It was something that came later. It was after I met Soldat Ustinov. I thought it might be kind of fun to try doing.

Keller: Were there other career goals that pro wrestling replaced.

Lynn: Nothing in particular.

Keller: What were the first steps you took to become a pro wrestler?

Lynn: Well, at first Soldat told me to talk to Eddie Sharkey. At the time I was pretty small. For the wrestling business I'm small now, but then I was quite a bit smaller. But I couldn't afford the camp fee of, I believe, \$2,500 at the time. So I decided to put it off for a while and trained hard for about three years. Then I heard about Brad Rheingan's camp. So I checked it out and I decided to go through his camp, which cost about the same as Eddie's.

Keller: In retrospect, have the steps you've taken been the right ones?

Lynn: So far, as far as my situation is concerned. I think everything has been done the way it should have been. Other than the fact that I think if I hadn't had some other problems in my life that I could have pushed myself harder as far as getting my name around.

Keller: When did you first enter camp?

Lynn: Three years ago this week.

Keller: How long were you in training camp?

Lynn: It was three months, four nights a week, three hours a night.

Keller: What thoughts went through your mind the first time you stepped into camp?

Lynn: Right when I walked in there were some guys training in the ring throwing each other

around. So when I first saw that, I thought, "This is going to be painful." The first weeks of training camp we did mostly conditioning. First off we stretched out, warmed up, and then we went out and ran. Then we came back and did amateur style wrestling.

Keller: How much was amateur wrestling stressed at first?

Lynn: A lot.

Keller: How long into camp was it before you learned to bounce off the ropes and to absorb a bodyslam correctly?

Lynn: We started learning some of the basic holds, wristlocks, hammerlocks, probably the second week. We started taking the bumps in the second week. Some of the more advanced basic moves we didn't start until the third week.

Keller: At one point did they talk about the ring psychology and that kind of thing as far as putting a match together?

Lynn: A third or half way through.

Keller: Was there much stress put on working a crowd?

Lynn: Not really on working a crowd. The main psychology we worked on was reasons for doing certain moves. Working the crowd, I think, takes years of experience to learn that kind of psychology.

Keller: What went through your mind when you got home after the first day of camp?

Lynn: There weren't any second thoughts. I knew it was going to be a lot of hard work.

Keller: How long after graduating from training camp was it before you worked in front of a live crowd?

Lynn: It was October so I suppose about six months. I went back to camp and kept training. There were a lot of personal things that were going on in my life which I had to straighten out.

Keller: Tell me about your first match?

Lynn: It was in New Ulm, Minnesota and was a TV taping for Jim Kock's IWA.

Keller: What thoughts went through your mind the night before you had your first match in front of a live crowd? Were you able to sleep?

Lynn: It was hard to sleep. When I got there, I was nervous the whole next day. I still get nervous before my matches. It's gotten better, but I still don't know what's gonna happen.

Keller: What did you think when you stepped in the ring the first time in front of fans?

Lynn: My mind was blank.

Keller: During the match, was it easier or harder than you thought it would be?

Lynn: I did three matches that night. The first match was against The Terminators. They threw

my partner over to me and he tagged me in. And there was Wolf. I looked up at him and my mind was just blank. I said, "What am I going to do with this guy?"

Keller: What surprised you most during the first match, or was your mind just blank and you went through the motions?

Lynn: Yeah, that's it. Just went through the motions.

Keller: Since then, what steps have you taken to better prepare yourself for a full-time position? Do you talk to veterans, watch video tapes, or just learn through experience?

Lynn: All of the above. I watch a lot of Japanese tapes. I constantly train hard.

Keller: I've always wondered this. You obviously don't go through camp and learn every wrestling move. So how many moves did you know during your first match?

Lynn: Probably about a dozen.

Keller: Do you pick up a new move once a week and learn how to do it by watching a tape and then practicing it?

Lynn: A lot of it, like flying over the top rope, is just done during a match. A lot of the stuff I just try if I'm pretty positive I think I can do that move. I'll just do it during a match. Otherwise I will try to get to camp and try to work out on a mat. But a lot of the stuff I learn right in the ring.

Keller: Do you often have access to a ring to practice in?

Lynn: Not very often, no.

Keller: How do you practice, then, besides wrestling? Or do you just try to stay in shape?

Lynn: Staying in shape, basically. The stairmaster, Lifting weights all the time, of course. And it's hard to do, but I try to stretch out every day.

Keller: When you study video tapes, who are some of the wrestler you pattern yourself after?

Lynn: What I'd like to get my style more like is Jushin Liger and The Pegasus Kid (Chris Benoit). I also would like to learn a lot of the submission holds from the UWF.

Keller: When you wrestle on cards with wrestlers who have been in the sport for many years, do you learn a lot from them? In the PWA, what is the atmosphere as far as guys passing along advice?

Lynn: In the PWA, it's great. It's casual. You don't feel pressure if you make a mistake or something like your job is at stake. You also don't have to worry about someone bitching you out. I've learned a lot from a lot of the old-timers. If they happen to see my match, I'll ask them if there's any advice they can give me.

Keller: Recently you made the decision to

leave the PWA and work for the USWA full-time. What prompted that decision?

Lynn: It was something I had to do. I knew I would learn a lot. I knew I had to taste life on the road full-time. I was prepared for a lot of it before I went down there.

Keller: What were some of the stories you heard to prepare you for the road?

Lynn: You always hear about all of the ribbing that goes on.

Keller: What's the worst ribbing story you've heard?

Lynn: Hmmm. No, I can't say that one. You know, just people tampering with your stuff. You know, if you're driving down the road and they throw your bag out the window. Stuff like that goes on. But there was no ribbing down south. I wasn't too worried about it. If people rib me or mess with me, I'll just mess with them back.

Keller: To get the job with the USWA what is the process? Do you just call the promoter and ask or do you send a resume and go through an interview?

Lynn: I found out the address and sent down a video tape of some of my matches. The booker at the time was Eddie Gilbert and he brought me in.

Keller: Was money an issue?

Lynn: No. I didn't talk money at all. I knew I was just going down there no matter what they were paying. Well, I kinda heard what they were paying and I knew right away when I got down there if it was any less than that I was turning around and coming right back.

Keller: What was it like when you got down there? Just as you expected?

Lynn: Yeah, just as I expected.

Keller: Was the pay basically just enough to live on but not enough to create a savings?

Lynn: Yeah. In fact, I don't see how the heels can make it down there because all the babyfaces have their gimmicks that they sell and that helped a lot. Without that, you wouldn't be able to make it, I don't think. A lot of the guys who had been there a while they would usually make more on gimmicks than they got paid to wrestle. Everyone, as far as I knew, except for Dundee, Jarrett, and Lawler got paid the same.

Keller: How were you treated by the promoters upon your arrival?

Lynn: I was scheduled to show up for a TV taping Saturday morning in Memphis. So I showed up there, but when I got there, the guy who brought me in, Eddie Gilbert, was gone. I knew it was going to be shaky then. They all treated me nice, humane. but they were quiet and didn't let you know anything, whether they were going to do anything with you, any angles or anything.

Keller: Was it an atmosphere where you could ask?

Lynn: It was more like, "Keep your mouth shut and do what you're told."

Keller: Was the USWA a close group of wrestlers that welcomed a new guy or was it a group of individuals and cliques?

Lynn: No, they welcomed you. They made you feel at home. Everyone was really friendly, the wrestlers.

Keller: What was the average range for road trips?

Lynn: Besides the Dallas to Memphis trip where we got to ride on a bus and sleep, they ranged from two to three hours mostly.

Keller: Did you provide your own transportation?

Lynn: It varied for me. Everyone who was there had their system all worked out, who they rode with and stuff. Most of the time I rode with someone, but there were a few times I rode with myself.

Keller: How many days per week were you on the road?

Lynn: Between five and six days. Thursday and Fridays were spot shows and that varied.

Keller: What do you do while you're on the road besides wrestle? Bar hop, sight-see, workout, or just sleep?

Lynn: When you get up you try to hit the gym first. If you have to go get pictures made, you do that. Take care of personal business. Then just get on the road. but there wasn't much for a nightlife in Nashville which was where I was living.

Keller: Why did you end up leaving the USWA relatively soon after arriving?

Lynn: Because I was warned about the pattern that things worked down there and how they'll build you up a little but, use you a little bit, and then start to job you out. For me, that pattern went just like someone told me, so I got out before they could start jobbing me out.

Keller: What are the options for you and your peers now? Do you hope for a break or do you have to make your breaks?

Lynn: Both. I mean, you've gotta' have connections. I'm hoping for Japan. I'm gonna start training hard for the Japan style. Some Jushin Liger and shoot moves. I've started condition training the way they do, with the squats and all that. I'm gonna start training for that style even if I can't go right away. I don't want to go right away because I know I'm not physically ready for it. But I want to start training for that so before the end of the year I can get over there.

Keller: What does it take to get over there? Do you wait for their call? Do you create a

gimmick for yourself?

Lynn: I'm going to try to come up with gimmick that might get over there. It seems with that style wrestling, they like someone with mask.

Keller: How do you get to work in Japan?

Lynn: Good question. I don't know. I guess just try to find a connection.

Keller: Is there a high level of frustration with the wrestlers you're around in the PW and the USWA over the lack of full-time jobs? Does everybody always talk about the "good ol' days" when there were territories?

Lynn: Yeah, you always hear about that. Everyone misses the way it was before Vince came along, anyone working in a territory, once you were burned out in that territory, you could move on to another territory and make money but now it's just all oversaturated. Everywhere I tried.

Keller: What do you think it takes to make it big in pro wrestling today?

Lynn: Today to make it big in a big group it doesn't take that much wrestling talent anymore. You just need to look big, look the part, and have the connection. And sometimes if you're lucky, if you look the part, even without a connection they'll find you. That's what's disappointing because it doesn't take much wrestling talent. But I like it enough, so I'll keep trying to improve and learn more wrestling, but if I never make it big I'll just keep doing it part time because I enjoy it.

Keller: So far what has been your most memorable moment as a pro wrestler?

Lynn: Boy, that's a tough one. I can't nail it down to one moment. A few of the matches I've had with Ricky Rice and The Lightning Kid.

Keller: How about wrestling in the Mid-South Coliseum, the "big arena" for the first time?

Lynn: It was exciting pulling up and seeing the big coliseum you're going to be wrestling in. I can't wait to know what it feels like to wrestle in a full arena when it's full. I can't even imagine right now what it would be like. So it was kind of exciting pulling up to the big arena knowing I was going to wrestle in it, but then when I saw the crowd, what a let down.

Keller: Have you had a most embarrassing moment?

Lynn: I would say the first match I had at George's against Doug Whalen. It was pretty embarrassing because I did not do well.

Keller: When you go to sleep at night, where do you see yourself in five or ten years? One of the big groups in the States or in Japan?

Lynn: I would rather make it in Japan. They're more serious about wrestling than all of this cartoon crap.

MADUSA

Madusa, after being part of the "Dangerous Alliance" as a manager in WCW during 1992, left the organization in a contract dispute. In the following multi-part, comprehensive "Torch Talk" interview conducted Mar. 14, 1993 the former AWA Women's Champion talks about how she broke into wrestling and what she plans to do in the future. She also examines the role of women in wrestling and the politics she faced in WCW under the leadership of Bill Watts.

Keller: When did you first think about getting into professional wrestling and why?

Madusa: When I was younger, I never thought of becoming a wrestler and I'm not a second-generation, so that didn't encourage me, either. I really didn't have any inspiration as far as anybody trying to get me into it through my younger years and pre-teens. I ran into a friend of mine, Jenny. I was nursing at the time and her boyfriend was a Hollywood stunt coordinator and he said I should be in the entertainment business and I should try wrestling. He knew about my athletic background and being a gymnast and stuff like that. When he mentioned wrestling, I thought he meant something like mud wrestling. I ignored him for a while, but they kept on calling

me and then I got together with them and they introduced me to Ed Sharkey in Minneapolis. I started in 1984 and started training with all of the boys. There really weren't any women. I had my first match, after training for two weeks. I never looked back. I never looked back at nursing. I wish I grew up around the business. I wish I knew a lot more about it. I know a lot about the business and I appreciate everything about it. Sometimes I wish I was a second generation wrestler. I remember sometimes seeing wrestling on TV when I was a kid and I would just go, "Oh my goodness, oh my gosh." I remember seeing Ric Flair going "Whooh!"

Keller: What did your parents do?

Madusa: My mother is self-employed, cleaning houses and does favors and odd stuff. My dad works at the U of M, University of Minnesota. He's in engineering.

Keller: Talk about your athletic background that prompted the suggestion you get into wrestling?

Madusa: I played softball a lot and a lot of volleyball out at the beaches. I set a lot of high school records in track and the high jump and gymnastics. That kept me really busy. I went to High School in Robbinsdale, Minn. From high school I went into modelling, I then went into nursing, and then I went into wrestling. One extreme into another.

Keller: What kind of nursing were you doing?

Madusa: I was doing in-house health care. That was very self-rewarding. Then I helped handicapped children. It was depressing working in the nursing homes because once the elderly are in the nursing home, they feel their life is at the end and they don't even try. It really gave me a lot of encouragement to try to get these people to keep going. A lot of them weren't that old, like around 60. They still had a good life ahead of them. I hate to see people give up.

Keller: Talk about your interest in the business and about whether you consider yourself a serious "student of the game."

Madusa: Once I got into the business, I didn't know anything about it. I didn't look at it as a free ride to Hollywood which a lot of women mistakenly take this business for. It was a challenge to me because of all of the athletics and creativity involved. Back then I wanted to be the master of the game. It took me many, many years to become what I am and to feel that I am the master of women's wrestling. It was a big challenge. I wish I knew more before I got into it. I met a lot of people who were second generation wrestlers and I was like a sponge and I soaked up everything I could. I wanted to carry this as far as I could. I knew there was a never-ending tunnel in this business and you can go as far as you would let yourself go. And there were always adversities and hurdles to go over. To me, that

made me want to get stronger and go further and further.

Keller: Would you have taken any different turns along the path through your wrestling career?

Madusa: Absolutely not. I don't regret anything that I've done. I've done everything clean. I am where I am now without feeling that I did anything wrong at all. I feel really good in my heart and in my soul. I'm a train-a-maniac and I don't think I could have worked harder. I mean, I went through my steps in life and each step I took and achieved, I never looked back. I just looked back to keep sight of where I came from. It's just really rewarding. Every once in a while I'll get a grip on myself and look back on my old photos and the old magazines and stuff like that, just looking back helps me polish as I go further.

Keller: When you first entered the business, what did you see as a woman's role in wrestling?

Madusa: Well, I didn't really know about women in wrestling when I first started. But once I got started, I saw a lot of cheesecakes in there and I got really disappointed. I knew there were a lot more women out there like me, but they usually got caught up in drugs or steroids or it was this or that. I saw a lot of talented women in this business come and go and it is really sad.

Keller: Have you used steroids or drugs?

Madusa: Yes I have. I would be a fool and I'd be a liar if I said I hadn't. I think everyone has. I tried once Anovar, that's when I first went into the business. I was bodybuilding right before going into the AWA. And I tried Anovar. I went to my physician and told her what I was doing and she was watching me and I was six weeks into my cycle and I started urinating blood, and I've never felt so much pain in my life. It was awful. I just collapsed over and called my doctor and she goes, "Stop immediately and don't you think about using it again." And I never did. All it takes for me is an experience—of course, I know some things are just bad without having to experiment with them first—but there have been things I have tried like that. In a sense, it was a great experience. I'm glad I did it. I liked what it did. It made me hard, my body hard, I lost a lot of fat. I thought I was huge and muscular. I was squatting 225 and benching who knows what. I was a fanatic on squatting, doing 225, 235 for 10, 12 sets. I thought, "This is sick." I looked at myself in the mirror and I'm going, "I'm not even feminine anymore." So I think that was the power above telling me, "Get off the stuff, get back to being a lady, and go forward in your career." That's what happened and it took off.

Keller: Talk about your AWA days.

Madusa: I really respect the AWA days. Wahoo McDaniel is the one who called me to get me in there. And it was Verne (Gagne) who gave me the chance and the great TV exposure and a



Madusa

Photo by WK

nice long run with Sherri Martel. She taught me a lot. Those were the good old days, that's where I started, those are my roots.

Keller: What initially became your goals in wrestling?

Madusa: It was a challenge to open up the door. I started learning about the women, reading more about the history of women, who was in the business, who did what, how many titles here and there. They're the ones who gave me the inspiration, and I thought I would create a whole new different entity, a whole new different type of woman in wrestling, not only a beautiful woman, but an athletic woman and one who can speak her own mind and can stand up for herself because this is a very male-oriented business. I still beat my head against the wall sometimes because I would like to rip off some of these guys' heads.

Keller: You entered the sport originally in the ring. You have since played roles in wrestling outside the ring. What do you see as your place in this business?

Madusa: There's a lot of feelings here. When I start something, I put a five year plan together. I set goals and I don't set them too high, but I set them high so I can reach them. So they don't become an aberration of my life. When I first got into the business, I saw just wrestling. And then what happened was when Sherri left the AWA, I was stuck in a position of wrestling and managing. That was, like, "Wow, there's a lot more than wrestling. There's managing, also." I kind of liked it. I've been a tomboy all of my life, growing up as a kid and everything. All of a sudden I was going up to the ring and I was being looked at like a big sex object and it really bothered me. I can't forget how my body is built, you know, and being out there dressed the way I am. But there's all these old fogies out front doing these gyrations. It really bothered me, but I just kept it inside and focused on doing my job. But then, what I did was I learned to utilize that into a great thing and become a more aggressive manager and be better at what I was doing. I learned to use the fans as a tool and enhance Madusa. It all worked really well, so I went from wrestling to managing and I could see where a lot of women would get caught up in a whole different field and wanting things and getting opportunities and that's when you start getting all fog-headed. When they start wanting a quick trip here and wanting to do this and that. A lot of bad paths have been taken by not just women, but men also. And then from there, I saw other things. I realized I could be in this business all of my life. I said I wanted to be the best woman wrestler in America that there has ever been and be respected and open up the doors for the younger wrestlers. I was the first female American wrestler to get a contract in Japan and open the doors for people like Ms. Malenko and all the others. It makes me feel good. Then I ventured off and gave Verne my two months notice. I felt frustrated and stagnated

by it. I thought there had to be more somewhere. So I gave my two months notice and I said, "Verne, you better think about doing something here." Because I had the AWA belt at the time. I was just sitting around and that's when Japan called. I went over there the first time for six weeks, the second time for four weeks. The third time I was over there they offered me a two-year contract. It was phenomenal. I never looked back. I was in heaven. I worked, I slept, I ate, I went to the bathroom, everything wrestling. I put up the ring, I took down the ring, and it was great. I did not make the money that the people thought I did. It wasn't good money at all, but you cannot buy knowledge and I would never trade my experience there for anything. When I got back from Japan, I wanted to chill. I got back and had culture shock when I got back to America, not when I went to Japan. People here were so rude and aggressive and so lethargic. Everybody wants something for nothing here and it really pissed me off. You know how everyone wants a quick shot at everything. So I was sitting around for a couple of months relaxing, working some independents for Joel Goodhart—he always treated me well and I'll just end that with a big period—and then after that, WCW contacted me. I went down there and then started to see a whole new life, business oriented and directed. I started wrestling and I did one wrestling match on TV and did this flying bodypress off the corner turnbuckle onto Michael Hayes and there was a lot of heat there. Ever since then they never let me wrestle again.

Keller: What was the issue?

Madusa: Maybe I outshined a few other people. I don't know. I just got a lot of heat.

Keller: Was it a gender issue or was it how well it was done?

Madusa: A few people told me it was well done, and that's all I'll say. So from there, I just started laughing. I chuckled and thought, my god, there's competition for the boys from me? It shouldn't be that way. I just thought back and analyzed everything and thought, fine. So a couple weeks went by and there was a big meeting, a big meeting of the people who were in charge in this room. And I opened the door and said, "Well, it's really nice to see all of you gentlemen sitting here." And they said, "Well, we're having a meeting right now, Madusa." And I said, "Well, what perfect timing. Just get used to it gentlemen, I might be the first woman booker ever in the history of wrestling." (laughs) And I just worked out and I think that was the end of my career from there. I just started laughing because there were some who probably thought, "Well, I'll be damned. She's serious."

Keller: Are you serious?

Madusa: Well, you know what, I wouldn't mind being around the office and doing a few things. I am very creative. I don't know. It's not

at that point yet, but it's in the back of my head pushing for women. And not one minute was I pushing for women in WCW. There are a few women wrestlers out there—one mainly in my mind—who badmouthed me. I think she just needs a personality adjustment myself. She said really shot the women down in WCW and didn't give them a chance and I didn't try getting them in there. Every other day I was trying to get somebody in there.

Keller: Who are you talking about?

Madusa: Terri Power. And you can tell her I'm looking for her. I heard she had a mouth on her. Until I talk to her, I'm not going to pass judgement on anyone. To each their own.

Keller: What has disappointed you more than anything in your years in the business about the business?

Madusa: When people say something to you and they have an idea in America, it takes six to twelve people to sit at a big table and make a decision and it takes them three to six months to come up with the decision and by then it has already been done by the opposition and it's already blown out of proportion and can't be done.

Keller: As you have looked at how this business portrays women, what are the major problems?

Madusa: I think if women were ever going to make it in America as wrestlers, they need to separate the two different areas of women in wrestling. There's managers and valets and there's women's wrestling. If one woman happens to be both, she has to separate them totally. And that's kind of like what I do. I've been trying really hard to do that. When I was managing Rick Rude, I was a total manager and totally feminine. When I come to the ring to wrestle, I come to that ring as a big jock and I make sure my body is covered. But they still can see my femininity and curves. I'm not trying to hide that, but you don't need to be bouncing out everywhere, either. I think women should focus on their ability in the ring before what they look like in the ring. That's far more important. And I think they should focus on training. A lot of women get in the ring far ahead of time before they know what the hell they're doing. I'm the prime example when I first started because I didn't know what the hell I was doing when I was in there. I'm just speaking from experience and from the heart.

Keller: Are you impressed by women in the sport currently?

Madusa: By the Japanese, yes.

Keller: How about those in this country?

Madusa: There's a few really athletic women out there who have the right idea. Sometimes they have this athletic ability, but as soon as they open their mouths, they lose it. Sometimes you're

our own worst enemy. The business is so hard. Women are so fickle. Women and men are so different. Women hate women and women look at other women because of their own desire. Women are so jealous of one another. That's the biggest problem. You have to have an independent, intelligent woman who has had the school of hard knocks to really appreciate what he's doing. Then the women would not be jealous of others.

Keller: Have you been jealous of other women?

Madusa: No. Frustrated. Frustrated is the word for me. I'm very happy for a few women who have done well. I am very happy for Debbie Drake (Malenko) taking the spot that I left, taking over for me.

Keller: What do you believe is the ideal role for women's pro wrestling, as a separate promotion or part of the big two?

Madusa: Well, I can tell you that between tours when I was here home for three weeks happened to be when the LPWA had one of their tapings. I wrestled for that group. They asked me, so I did. I wrestled for an all-women's organization in Japan, for an all-women's organization here, and as a woman for a men's organization here, so I speak to that also. Working for an all-men's organization and trying to wrestle, like I did, there isn't a place for us. I mean, I don't know why.

Keller: Is it because men are running the promotions or the men wrestlers don't want it?

Madusa: They don't respect women wrestlers here. My backhand slap to the face of them here was they never had a woman who could do the job right. All I needed was a chance. What happened was they gave me a chance and I felt I did so well they took it off the market. Really, I'm not the one who saw it that way. I had people come up to me and tell me that, bring into light what was happening behind the scenes.

Keller: You've been active in an out-of-ring role in wrestling. When you first got behind the microphone in the AWA, was that something you liked to do and planned to make part of your career?

Madusa: (laughs) Yeah, I liked it. But couldn't speak worth sh—. It was funny. It was a great experience. I still have those on tape. I go back and I see when I was with Curt Hennig, Kevin Kelly, Nick Kiniski, and that was it. Well, I did something with Diamond Dallas Page, Pat Tanaka, and Paul Diamond. As time progressed, I got better and better. And now I just yearn for the mic. I wish they would have utilized me more.

Keller: Are there other activities you would like to explore to take advantage of your experience in wrestling?

Madusa: Yeah. I do a lot of extra schooling activity here. There are a lot of opportunities. I just signed a two-year contract with a company

and it is for fitness videos. I will have my own line of fitness videos. It'd kind of self-defense for women and men, a "boxer-size" type video. Yeah, it's happening. It will be internationally distributed.

Keller: Tell me about how you have marketed yourself?

Madusa: When I started out independent with Ed Sharkey, I saw a lot of money to be made. I don't know, I think I was a kid at heart. I wanted little trinkets and stuff. I was a little entrepreneur all of my life since I was a little kid.

Keller: What kind of things did you do as a kid?

Madusa: I would go knocking on doors and offer to mow lawns for 50 cents. I would offer to shovel people's driveway for a buck. I kept all of my money. We were really poor when I was a kid. I was an only child, so all the money I made I tried to give to my mother. We were just a poor little family, on welfare and everything. My mom and dad were divorced when I was 7. My dad went on with his life. I never saw him for five or six years after that. I kind of spoke to him intermittently. My mom, my dad, and myself have been kind of apart. They were kids having a kid. I pretty much grew up on my own. I was 16.

Keller: How did you make money through marketing?

Madusa: Oh yeah. I just knew the value of a dollar. I just knew how to make money. I went off and made t-shirts and bartered this and that. When I look back at it, I was doing very well and making good money off of my merchandise, well enough to keep from living out of my car.

Keller: What kind of a chance do you think women's wrestling has to start drawing fans?

Madusa: Like I was saying, it will have to be separate and looked at as two different types. It will have to be taken seriously. Like I said before as far as women training and getting in there, they are going to have to be dead serious. They're going to have to get in there and fight, not any of this hair-pulling and scratching. Not just screaming, but grunting, too. It's going to have to start being real, so-to-speak. The women have to market themselves and improve themselves.

Keller: What do women have to do differently from men to draw money?

Madusa: The one thing that makes it in this world in the entertainment business is originality. I think for a woman in this business, she is going to have to be very different. She is going to have to be one of a kind to make it in this business and believe in herself, not change her image every year. A woman has to focus on originality. A woman and the body and the parts we have are looked at a certain way. And if we do one thing, we are looked at a certain way. So they're going to have to carry themselves well, they're going to have to speak well, they can't have a dirty mouth,

and it helps to have a great education in the field of wrestling. When I say education, I don't mean a high school diploma, I mean street smarts. That's what I mean. There are a lot of women who are very educated, I'm sure, who don't have a clue about life. They're not street smart and that's where they flunk.

Keller: Are you embarrassed by GLOW and POWW or do you see it as something having nothing to do with you?

Madusa: I think it has harmed us. Every woman has to make a buck, but it has shut down us, the real women of professional wrestling.

Keller: What is it about Japanese women's wrestling that makes it so successful in that country?

Madusa: It is the power. It is the belief that the promoters have in women. It is the determination that the women wrestlers have. They do not give up. They focus just on wrestling and not what they are going to do the next night after drinking or meeting a guy at a bar.

Keller: Talk about the promoters' beliefs in the women.

Madusa: The promoters believe in the girls. They have to have a tryout. There are thousands of girls that try out every year for this organization.

Keller: They are girls. They aren't even 18 yet, right?

Madusa: They're 16 years old and the women over there have to retire when they're 26, but the Japanese have slowly begun to believe they don't have to retire at 26 anymore, that they're slowly letting them hang on further and further because they can see Americans still being very productive past 26. They're trying to be very Americanized in many ways. The promoters believe in their girls. They have an organization that has money and they believe in these girls and they market them. Each girl has her own character and originality. Each girl helps other girls. The other girl may spend an hour in the ring with another girl going over different moves, making her do 600 bumps, 200 push-ups. It's family. That's the problem here in America. Everybody's out for themselves only.

Keller: What that is successful about Japanese women's wrestling could transfer to this country?

Madusa: Relationships (laughs). Well, sorry. That was a pretty broad statement. Seriously, though, I've been trying for the last year and a half to try to get the Japanese girls over here and stay with us, kind of how the American's there stay in their organization. We need to get the Japanese girls over here to teach them something and discipline. The women here lack discipline. I don't know, maybe the men do, too. That's what we need. We need guidance, the women do. Why do you think the women want to go over to Japan

When you get a man in your life, you get all screwed up. I'm not just saying because of the man, but when you're focused on a career for just five years, well then damn be it. If I was to have serious relationships when I was over there for two years, I wouldn't have excelled.

and wrestle so much? Why are there girls over there that are staying? Because they know that is the bread and butter to start their life to come back to America. We need them here. They've been doing it for us. Wake up WCW and WWF. Get them over here.

Keller: As a future possible booker or promoter in some capacity, and if you had the opportunity to bring women's wrestling to this country, very specifically how would you get Japanese women over to the average fans?

Madusa: You build them up, you don't just bring them over here. Just like any storybook, you build them up. They are very beautiful women. There are women who speak English. Americans love Japanese stuff. They love the writing and trinkets and the clothes and the style. Especially, when they see the Japanese girls come over here and wrestle, they'd make their mark. If you could split the Japanese up and put some Japanese girls with Americans and team them together, I think that's what's going to make the Americans watch. That way they won't be so one-sided.

Keller: It won't be a nationalistic issue then?

Madusa: That is my point. Very much so.

Keller: What else needs to be done in this country, in general, to help the wrestling industry?

Madusa: A lot of this is directed to the men as far as how I feel toward the women.

Keller: What did you learn when you were in Japan, first about wrestling and second about life and your aspirations?

Madusa: I really learned a lot about myself. I really learned to love my country and I really learned a lot more about my country. I don't know if that sounds funny. I learned to love more and to care. I had a lot more respect for people. I had a global view of everything. Besides learning the language and writing, I was able to have my own singles CD and videos and game and all that stuff. Those were just material things. For me to be able to experience life in a whole different country, I really found myself as a person. Not that I was lost in the meantime, but I just learned so much

about the culture and the people and what makes them tick and what they like and how they keep face. They don't get angry and don't show emotion. They have a lot of respect for other people. It's so beautiful in some ways, but so self-destructive in others.

Keller: What do you think is good and bad about those characteristics of the people of Japan?

Madusa: They are workaholics. They work almost 24 hours a day and then when they get a release, they go out drinking and get drunk and they're out on the streets. The women stay at home. A lot of things have changed. A lot of the women are starting to get their own jobs, which is unheard of. They are working and being independent. I've seen the change as time progressed. It's a very work-oriented, high-tech country. It's phenomenal. When they make a decision like they did with me, they make the decision within a day. They think, they analyze, they see a future, and then they do it. They said, "Let's have Madusa sing. She's an American. She's tall, she's blonde, she's whatever." And they just did it. They love Americanized things. It was one idea after another. They had Madusa t-shirts and hats. It was great. They did a lot of great things. My biggest high in the wrestling business has been over in Japan so far.

Keller: Talk about how your attitude changed in Japan?

Madusa: You take things for granted when you are here. You do. For instance, you expect the garbage man to be there on Monday. And when you go to the store, you know that there is going to be soap on the counter. You just take things for granted in this country too much. It's too easy over here. It's very care-free. I feel really lucky. I know I am. I just love my country. That's just the way it is.

Keller: How did you grow as a person in Japan?

Madusa: Deep down, I kind of was really quiet. I wasn't an introvert, but I was a loner. If I had a day off, I went and did things and jumped on a train and went somewhere. I didn't even know where I was going and then I'd try to find my way back. I'd go to different places and try talking myself back. Every day was an adventure. I was never bored.

Keller: Were you a loner to the degree that you did not have a personal life and long term relationships with men outside of your wrestling career?

Madusa: When I first went over there I was in a relationship over here with an American and it slowly dwindled. Of course, when I went over there, it didn't work. Now he's married and he's doing really well. He was a great guy. Distance for two-and-a-half years does not make for a relationship, not a good one, that is. So anyway, I had a relationship with Al, but that crumbled.

Then when I was over there, I didn't have time was always on a bus or a ferry boat or this or that. I was friends with girls, like the J.B. Angels who were in the WWF. Those girls were my buddies. Now one of them got married and is living in New York. She's got her own sushi place. She's doing really well. As far as relationships, I became great buddies with them and I communicate every once in a great while with them. There was another great relationship I had, it was with Fumi Saito. He does a lot of the video tapes and voice overs of American videos into Japanese. He is a very phenomenal, intelligent, bright young man. He speaks English quite well. A lot of the boys in the business know about him. He and I keep in contact. He went to school in Minneapolis for a while. I had a lot of great friends.

Keller: There is a lot of talk about the women wrestlers in that country forming relationships with each other because they are not allowed to have boyfriends. Is that more myth than reality or no one's business?

Madusa: I'm sure that's still the case, not allowing boyfriends, because they are very strict. There are the three no's: no smoking, no drinking, no men. Again, that comes from what I was saying about discipline. When you get a man in your life, you get all screwed up. I'm not just saying because of the man, but when you're focused on a career for just five years out of your life, well then damn be it. If I was to have serious relationships when I was over there for two years I wouldn't have excelled. I wouldn't have succeeded. If I would have had to worry about a boyfriend back in Minneapolis or Tampa or Atlanta, I wouldn't have done well. So I can really respect that. A lot of them have little love letter boyfriends... I've never seen an intimate relationship between two women while I was over there, but there are a lot of buddy-buddys, but hell what's wrong with that? There are a bunch of boyfriends running around the business back here, so what's wrong with girlfriends back there if there need be.

Keller: Would you ever like to live in Japan again?

Madusa: Sure. Aug. 25 they are having a big show so I may have a chance to return there this summer.

Keller: Might there be another long term stay for you there?

Madusa: I don't know. We're in the midst of conversations now.

Keller: What would you change about your experience in Japan?

Madusa: Businesswise, I was pretty well guided. I didn't know anything before going over there. For instance, Americans have a way of when they speak using their hands a lot. So, when we use our hands over there when we talk, they get really scared. They think we're Mafia or something. They think somebody who speaks

h a lot of gestures and can't sit still, that y're a problem. Isn't that something? There a lot of little things that you would find prising about people. One thing I would do is bably learn the language a lot more as far as iting and everything.

Keller: Did you learn to speak it very well?

Madusa: Well, I couldn't carry a conversation long as you and I have. I can get by pretty well.

Keller: Who would you rate as the best rker in Japan?

Madusa: Times have changed. There is yota. There are a bunch of upcoming stars... ey don't call them stars. They're pop idols.

Keller: What do you look most fondly at ncerning your stay in Japan?

Madusa: How they respected me as a human d as a person while I was over there. The time ey put into me. That country and those people it more time and belief and honesty—let me peat that word, honesty—to me than I have ceived in this country in business so far. And at's sad. That is sad. There's a few people in /CW who I thought were my friends and now ou don't even hear from them. All they're doing covering their own asses.

Keller: How did you hook up with WCW?

Madusa: My first contact with WCW was a couple phone calls when James Herd was there. What I heard through the grapevine was that somebody on the WCW committee wanted me to manage Ric Flair a long time ago. They wanted o contact me, but I was in Japan a couple years. I finally came home and I was contacted again by VCW and I spoke to them a couple times on the phone. I flew down there for a meeting and everything went well. I moved to Atlanta. They didn't ask me to move. I just moved from Minneapolis to Atlanta. I wanted the change of scenery anyway. If I wanted to work ndependents, it made more sense with the Carolinas and all that. It just made more sense. Minnesota and the whole five state region was ot happening for wrestling. So, they hired me, probably a couple weeks after I moved to Atlanta. James Herd and I went back and forth, ack and forth. I got a feeling, somebody told me, that James Herd wasn't too keen about a few things or something, I don't know. I think he was going through a stickler that he might be leaving. I didn't know any of the behind-the-door things. He was kind of hard to deal with. But he gave me a really nice deal. We went back and forth on a contract a little bit and signed the deal. I stayed in Atlanta for that whole year and five months. I was on a three month trial first of all. It was actually Magnum (Terry Allen) who initially got a hold of him.

Keller: For what role did they hire you?

Madusa: It was wrestling. My contract said "wrestler." Everything was wrestling. I think

they painted this picture that wrestling was it. I wasn't closed to the idea of other opportunities and that stuff. When I go into something, I want other opportunities. When you go into something, you don't want to stifle yourself to other opportunities. I thought I was going to be a wrestler and open up the doors for women again in the United States, to give women's wrestling a whole new athleticism type of thing. Then I got the door slammed in my face.

Keller: Do you think WCW was deceptive or did management changes simply change their plans?

Madusa: I think they just go through so many changes that when they get an idea they get lost with it. It's no one's fault except for their own. There's just too many hands in the cookie jar.

Keller: Tell me your thoughts on Kip Frey.

Madusa: Kip Frey didn't have a clue about this business except for the legal stuff. But he was good. He gave out all of those contracts only with an okay from the upper hand. He did not give out all of those contracts just because he felt like it because no company would okay that. And he had to get the okay. Everybody is saying he is dumb in giving away those contracts and he didn't know what the hell he was doing, that's absurd. When he started giving out these contracts, it got a lot of people on the outside talking and they were pissed off. I even come back a little bit from the old school and I understand what it's like when you work so hard and things are changing and it's becoming a little bit nicer or easier. You think, "God, I wish we would have had that when we were going through all of that." Things change and you have to accept that. Wrestling is going to get better and better for its players. I think it's kind of hard for the old-timers to concede that. It's not nice because they didn't get to have all of that nice stuff. I see their point. I was just lucky. It's timing. I was lucky to get what I did. Kip Frey was good to me and good to a lot of people. The contracts were great.

Keller: Talk about Bill Watts. How were you treated at first and did that change as time went on?

Madusa: My first impression of Bill Watts—I still don't have anything really bad to say about Bill Watts. Personally, I don't. Business-wise I might have a few feelings. Personally, he seemed like a really cool guy. He drove a Harley just like I do. He was pretty hip. He was a good conversationalist. He was pretty smart. When it came to business after a while, I didn't like how things were run. I think he was a little bit lost in direction, he didn't know what he was doing. He had to take a big organization and try to rejuvenate it and that's hard. He always conducted this like a big football team, but we're not in football. It was like he was the coach and we were the players or the team player. There's nothing wrong with being a team player, but you

have to remember that if you are going to treat us like football players, they have contracts and we should be able to have contracts or some kind of stability from a company that is going to treat us well enough so that we want to stay for longevity, where we will give you everything back—as much as you give to us, at least. With Bill, you didn't know whether you were coming or going even with a contract. You didn't know if you would be able to stay. He might have a bad day or you might sneeze wrong and he would find a reason to fire you. It was a really shaky ground when Bill came in. At first, it was cool. Bill Watts reminds me of my ex'.

Keller: Did you sense Watts changed as he found out how hectic the scene was?

Madusa: Yeah, he was more volatile. He was Mt. Everest ready to explode again.

Keller: What gave you the feeling he was ready to explode?

Madusa: I don't know what made him explode. I have a few men friends in my life where there is a pattern to these people. I don't know what makes them tick like that. I don't know if it comes from a background in their life that makes them this way, if it's because they haven't released something (laughs). I don't know why, but it can be a very good day, but if something isn't happening or a piece of paper isn't lying right, he could break a pencil or tear up a whole office because something doesn't go right. That temperament doesn't go well in an office setting. It just upsets everybody and makes everybody feel shaky and on the edge. It doesn't lead to a good work force.

Keller: Do you think it is good for WCW that he is no longer there?

Madusa: It takes time. It takes time to heal, it takes time to change. It takes belief and faith in a person or a company. I believe everybody had that for Bill. I think it was his temperamental ways that ruined him. I believe what goes around comes around. I believe that treating people really bad, somehow, someday, is going to come back at you in a different form.

Keller: What do you think about Rick Rude?

Madusa: Rick Rude is a very quiet man. He's very subtle. He's the type of man who thinks before a lot of action. He's very intellectual. I find him intellectually stimulating. I learned a lot from him. He's a great person to have in my life in a work environment. He's a pleasant man. He has a lot going for him, even in the near future.

Keller: Is there a downside to him that will add credibility to the good things you just said?

Madusa: He can be temperamental, also. I don't know what it is with the wrestlers. I think it must be in the water. It takes a lot for him to get mad and he's a very private man. He keeps business, business and his personal life, his

personal life. I think that's very attractive about Rick Rude. He's very confident.

Keller: What about Paul E. Dangerously?

Madusa: I think Paul E. is a very, very, very talented man. He has a lot going for him. His muscle is his mouth, and that's his tool. Paul E. is also his own worst enemy. He has a lot of, I don't know, ways of fabricating things in some ways. But that's Paul E. In communication and life in general, it could be about anything and make it more enlarged or more minute. I enjoyed being around him at WCW. He's another talent I found intellectually stimulating. He's a very intellectual guy, himself. If you spend time with Paul E., he's a great conversationalist and he always makes you laugh. And he's not a temperamental guy at all. He's a shy guy, and he's emotional, and he's sensitive. He's pleasant. He's just one of the guys. He gets teased a lot, but he really overcomes that. He carries himself well among all of the bullsh—.

Keller: How does he get teased? How do other wrestlers look at him?

Madusa: I don't think people realize his background. Paul E. has been in this business probably a lot longer than half of these wrestlers because he started out as a photographer. He has a lot of admiration for a lot of people in this business. I don't think people have taken the time to figure out what Paul E. is all about and I don't think a lot of people will because they look at Paul E. as just a manager making a lot of money and those are a lot of self-centered people.

Keller: What did you like most about working with Paul?

Madusa: It was his love of the business. Paul E. and I had a lot we could go back and forth on. It was a great '90s'ish thing between Paul E. and I. He's just a real pleasure to work with because he enhances Madusa to grow, to excel, to be more vibrant. He has pulled things out of me I didn't know I was capable of. Then I would see myself later on TV and go, "Wow."

Keller: How is Paul E. his own worst enemy?

Madusa: Paul E. wants to be well-liked by everybody. I feel Paul E. doesn't have to try so hard because if he digs deep down inside, he will find he is a really likable person. If he just focuses on himself he will understand people will like him for who he is. Sometimes he just says things that kind of get off track and pisses people off.

Keller: What about Arn Anderson?

Madusa: I met Arn and a lot of the guys for the first time when I came to WCW. Bobby Eaton, Arn, and others. I had the pleasure of meeting those two. Arn Anderson is another intellectual person, very smart. Bobby's your quiet type, he doesn't say much. But Bobby's a very home person, family-oriented. A very lovable type of personality. Arn is quiet. He's a sponge. He

soaks up everything. He hears everything. He'll dilute it with his stuff and come up with his own ideas. I found myself talking to Arn about a lot of things about business and about my feelings about this. I felt that the few times I talked to Arn on the airplane and stuff, he was very open with me about a few things. And Arn and I had one little stickler at the beginning. I was doing an interview and I couldn't get the interview right. I must have done it five or six times. And Arn shouts, "God damn women shouldn't be in this business." In the middle of my interview, I stopped and said, "Excuse me. You have a problem with me being in the business? Why don't you just get the f—k out of here so I can do my business and you're not interfering with me. And until I'm done, then you can come in and tell me what you think after. I don't need any male chauvinist pigs like you thinking that women shouldn't be in the business because I've had enough from you." All the boys just went, "Yeah!" and started cheering. Then there was heat for a while and eventually he and I made up. I think ever since then Arn has respect for me and we've been really buddies since then.

Keller: You talked a little bit about Bobby Eaton. What is it that makes Bobby tick?

Madusa: Bobby's very shy. He embarrasses very easily. The guys all liked him. I don't think there's one person I know who didn't like Bobby Eaton. Bobby's himself, he's very conservative in life. I love Bobby to death because he'd always bring me coffee. He was great, I love him.

Wade Keller: What is your impression of a wrestler many have anointed the next superstar, the next franchise—Steve Austin?

Madusa: Steve is a very young wrestler who has a lot of ideas and feelings. He is very personal. He and I have spoken quite a bit about the business and our talent and our characters. I think at the beginning, he gave me a lot of respect and he asked me a lot of questions about what I thought about his match, what I thought about what he did in his match. It made me feel good I was getting respect from even male wrestlers. There are people like Steve and a few other men who have asked me and that is the greatest feeling to get respect from men in this business. Steve is a hell of a talent and I think he'll go far if he keeps focusing like he is. His feelings get hurt really easily. If a joke or rib is played on him, he takes it really to heart. He is a very deep and sensitive man, a very emotional guy.

Keller: With all of the praise that is piled on him as a big part of the future of this business, does he show signs of developing an ego that could hurt his standing with some other wrestlers?

Madusa: No. He's a very personal guy. He doesn't have any goal other than to do good. He loves the business. But he is a penny-pincher. He saved his money. I mean, this guy wouldn't buy a pair of boots for ten years. He is very

economical.

Keller: Rounding out your comments on the Dangerous Alliance, what do you think Larry Zbyszko?

Madusa: I always looked up to Larry Zbyszko all the way back to the AWA. I don't think Larry had respect for me back then. I think he though was just another blonde-haired, blue-eyed bimbo woman who wanted a quick trip to Hollywood. But I stuck around, and I think that's how I gained his respect. Again, here is another very intellectual guy. There are a lot of smart men in this business. His interviews are so fascinating. I am so drawn in by him. I love to listen to him. He is a great piece of work. He's the type of guy who could do something and not care less what people think. He is Larry. He's very cordial. He's a gentleman.

Keller: What about Sting, the big babyface of World Championship Wrestling?

Madusa: I even feel he is a big babyface, even in home life. He's just a big kid. Sting is a big kid. He has tried so much to pull this WCW organization together. He wants so much for this company to succeed. He is the needle that is sewing everything together, trying to keep the guys together. He spreads himself so thin.

Keller: What does he do to try to keep the guys together?

Madusa: Speaking to them, talking to them, telling them to hang on if they don't like this. He has his own things to do, his own things to worry about. Sure, he's at the top of the totem pole, but there's got to be someone up there. If it's not him, it's going to be someone else. I don't think he gets respect from a lot of the people at WCW, the wrestlers themselves. Sting was very thoughtful toward me and women in the business. He really believed in me. At the time of confusion between (Bill) Watts and I, he even called me at home and said, "Madusa, if you leave, we are going to lose a lot in this company and I just really wish you would think about it. I got tears in my eyes and I thought, "Wow, there aren't a lot of good men in this business who respect women in this business." Not me, but women.

Keller: Did you see him grow as a leader over time?

Madusa: You become stagnant in a position only if the upper hand makes you that way and stifles you in a position. He's a real leader. I know the guys look up to him. I'm sure a lot of guys wish they were in his position, but who wouldn't? But that should only make the other guys more hungry and want to fight for that position because whoever is on top at anything in life ought to be looking over their shoulder because there's always someone nipping at your heels. It makes it more fun in life and more competitive and makes you strive and be more hungry, even on top. I think success isn't getting success, it's maintaining it that's the key.

Keller: What is the downside of Sting?
Madusa: He spreads himself too thin and tries to make everybody happy.

Keller: What about Missy Hyatt?
Madusa: Missy's a very beautiful woman. I think she's a very pretty girl. She's been in this business a long time and she fought her way trying to keep her position. She's loved the business for a long time. She had a good thing going while she was married to Eddie Gilbert. Missy deserves respect in a few areas. My feeling of respect toward Missy was she was able to hold onto her job as long as she did. But, Missy is Missy. Everybody has a certain type of character about them and Missy is a freegoing, carefree attitude—adjustment sometimes, that's all. She can become annoying, but I think Missy just doesn't think sometimes when she says things and she does embarrassing things that may humiliate her in the public eye for what she's supposed to be portraying as this image and I think that has really ruined a part of her. If she can overcome that, it's going to be her own demon to fight, to overcome that whole picture she has created. If she can overcome that, I think she will rise above it and become something different.

Keller: How is Missy Hyatt, the person, different from Missy Hyatt, the character on television?

Madusa: Not much.

Keller: What are your thoughts on Eddie Gilbert, your ex-husband?

Madusa: Eddie, we met when we did a radio interview on Joel Goodhart's radio show. Eddie and I hit it off really well. Here is another person who is very intellectual, always reading something. He's always reading, reading, reading. He has a love for the business and a drive you wouldn't believe. I wish he could have gotten more of a break in this business. Eddie and I got along really well. I knew Eddie even before I went into WCW. I want to believe and say, "Yeah, Eddie and I were married," but I think we went through a phase more than anything and rushed into it without knowing exactly what we were doing. It happened. But Eddie deserves a lot of respect in this business. He's worked really hard. All he's been doing is fighting with himself, his own demons, whatever that may be. I don't know. I just wish Eddie the best.

Keller: Without delving too much into your personal life, what is "personal demons" or something having to do with the wrestling business that caused you to break-up so quickly?

Madusa: I think it was a combination of both.

Keller: A lot of people talk about it being difficult to be married and in the business, much less married to someone in the business.

Madusa: To me that isn't a problem, I mean

being with someone who's in the business or being married to somebody in the business or being friends with someone in the business. It's how you look at it, how you develop it, it's what other ingredients you put into it in your life. You've got to develop your own creation. A lot of people destroy themselves in thinking that you can't have this person or that person because they're in the business. Myself, I always felt it enhances it. I never had a problem with it.

Keller: What do you think Eddie Gilbert's potential is in this business?

Madusa: He has a great mind for this business. He's a great wrestler and I love to watch him work and stuff. He's the old Tennessee, old-Southern wrestling type. He has a lot of great ideas. I don't see why he can't put them to use and have work with somebody or something with his ideas. I think Eddie's got to be happy with himself first before he can go on.

Keller: What about Jim Ross?

Madusa: Jim Ross I really didn't know too well, except he was really good as a commentator. He did really well and he loves this business. He loves the flair of it, the opulence it brought to him. He loved the attention. It was Jim Ross, you know. He felt like a star at times, I'm sure. I think that's what Jim Ross is all about sometimes. He loved to play, he had his women. I felt awkward one time when he kept asking me out. I set him straight—I'll just say that—and we remained friends. I think that's the only reason I've survive in this business is because you put your foot down with somebody or you don't.

Keller: Not being a wrestler, what were Jim Ross's strengths and weaknesses in dealing with the stardom, his position, and the wrestlers?

Madusa: I don't know. I don't know if he had favoritism or if he just liked big-breasted, blonde-haired, blue-eyed women, or what he liked, or what his thing was. I don't know what his schtick was. I really didn't know him too well.

Keller: Did you know Tony Schiavone very well?

Madusa: Tony was great. He and I would talk about kids, cooking, wine, and wrestling. I liked Tony Schiavone a lot. He's great at what he does. He was behind me and I still want to believe that.

Keller: What about Jesse Ventura?

Madusa: Jesse was great. Jesse has his own direction. He's another one that sets his own ways and standards and says, "To hell with you if you don't like this." He has a great image and people really enjoy him.

Keller: Did you deal with him much on a one-on-one basis?

Madusa: I did a lot of his make-up, so we kind of nonchalantly talked. We're both from

Minneapolis, so we talked about him being mayor. So it was good.

Keller: What about Eric Bischoff?

Madusa: There's another one from Minneapolis, from the AWA days. Eric is a very sharp-looking guy, very young. He, too, is getting better and better at what he does. It's kind of neat to see people change and grow and get better at what they're doing. He has a lot of ideas and wants in life.

Keller: What do you think his goals are in wrestling right now?

Madusa: He's young. He has a young mind. He has a lot of neat ideas. He's been in this business a long time and knows a lot about it. It's not like taking somebody in from off the street and giving them a position and saying, "Here you go." If WCW keeps positioning themselves this way with people who have experience in certain fields and stuff, I think they just might get it together.

Keller: Who do you think was the behind-the-scenes leader among the wrestlers?

Madusa: The only sense I ever got would be Sting because of his love and concern for WCW.

Keller: Did you get to know WCW executive Sharron Sidello?

Madusa: She's a very bright woman, that's why I thought it was great to have a woman's view in this business in the office because it gives a whole different dimension where men tend to lack. I'm just saying men say and do things where women pick up on it and vice-versa. It's good to have both in the office. Women's needs and sensitivities are much different than men's so that's why I think collaborating and putting them together and building on them is very good. Sharron really enhances the company, very much so.

Keller: Do you know if you were considered for the position Luna now holds? Did you ever contact the WWF after you left WCW?

Madusa: No. I never spoke to them. I never called them. And with me moving around so much, they probably wouldn't know how to get a hold of me, anyway. I wasn't familiar with Luna's position. I don't know if it's for now or if it's long term, but I think it's great. I wish her the best.

Keller: Would you like to return to one of the two major promotions or are you content working independently?

Madusa: I am going to continue to do things intermittently in Japan. I had a relationship with them that was absolutely beautiful that was almost ruined by being with WCW. I didn't get my letters and faxes from WCW telling me that Japan wanted me to work. I didn't get them until I quit. That made me very ill. I'm going to

continue to go forward. I have a lot of things going on. I need someone to believe in me. I am very organized, very positive, I am very set in my life and my career, but I am open to a lot of things. If WCW were to take notice of that again and want to do something again, I'm not closing them out, but if New York (the WWF) is interested and they have something up their sleeve, I am not ruling them out either.

Keller: Given your years of observing and participating in pro wrestling, what do you think WCW needs to do organizationally to be successful?

Madusa: Without getting into a long story, they just need to do editing sort of things. They're trying to find the niche, the hole, the loop, and trying to tighten it. They need to focus on the future of what wrestling is going toward. I think that's a little less house shows and a little more television and pay-per-views. They can't copy New York because New York has their own identity. WCW needs to create their own. I believe that two large corporations or maybe three (can make it). I think more competition in wrestling is better and more lucrative for the wrestlers.

Keller: What are your longterm goals for life?

Madusa: I love life. I love life, Wade. I am a very happy person. I wake up with my mind always working. I am a bubbly person. It takes a lot for me to get sad. My long term plan? I believe I am successful now and it will continue to grow. My goal is to try to maintain that success.

Keller: What are your long term goals? Do you want to have kids some day? Do you want to stay in wrestling?

Madusa: Do I want to have kids? I love kids.

Keller: Does having kids fit in with your plans to travel a lot during your career?

Madusa: I want little boys. I want little boys running around. And little girls. I think, no, I know I can have children and my career. If need be, I can have a nanny. That way my kids will not be without. I will not go shove them in somewhere. I'd rather have a nanny, that way they're in their own environment. You choose your environment and that environment is what shapes you. I am going to be very picky about the environment my kids are in. I will not have a violent home. I will not have a brassy home. Children to me would be my life. They would be very much a part of my life and my career, so a nanny would be very important. No, I don't have any children now. I'm not married.

Keller: You're living with Greg Valentine now, right?

Madusa: Right... Greg and I met when we were in WCW. It will be a year this April. It's been a long, interesting, rewarding, fun,

confusing year. (laughs). I love older men, and he's older than I am. Greg looks great for his age. He only looks like he's thirtysomething. He has a full head of hair. And he's a Teddy bear. He's a good guy. I'd say he has a good five or six years in this business before he retires. He knows that and he wants to make the best of it. He has goals. We sat down and talked about our goals and plans and directions. I like to plan life with five-year-plans, that way if you run into adversity, you can look back at your plan and see what you're doing or where you're going. Then you can get right back on track. And Greg has never really set goals. When I came into his life here in Florida, his house was a complete pig-sty. He just needed reorganization. He never had anyone to get him organized. Now he feels reorganized and really set. He's really happy. Another thing with Greg—I don't know why I get involved with these type of men—he's a very temperamental guy. I don't like it, but I think it just comes with wrestling. What the hey, you know.

Keller: What are your hobbies outside of wrestling?

Madusa: I love pets. I love my kees hound, my little puppy. His name is Kisska; it's gotta be a Japanese name. I will probably breed... my dog.

Keller: Do you add that because people are often reading into what you say?

Madusa: No, but just in case, I like to clear it. People are going to come up with their judgements, anyway, no matter how much you want to explain yourself.

Keller: Do you ever intentionally throw in things that have double-meanings just to screw around with people?

Madusa: No, I don't intentionally try to screw with their minds. I'm a playful person with my spouse or something. Yeah, maybe with some other people, too. I'm not really flirty or anything. I find men find it very hard to come up to me and talk to me because I'm such a tall, big woman. That's why I've found it very tough to be with men on the outside of this business because they find me very intimidating. Maybe it's because I'm up there kicking ass on Paul E. Dangerously.

Keller: What about your hobbies?

Madusa: I love to water ski. I'm just learning to slalom. I love learning language. I am picking up more of the Italian, more of the Japanese, and a little bit of German. I love learning and I'm always trying to expand somewhere, somehow. I know sign language and so I like once in a while, when I see a deaf person... Like an instance here recently, at an autograph session, a few deaf people came up to me. I could tell they were trying to ask me some questions. All of a sudden, I started speaking to them in sign language. It just flooded them, they were so touched. It made me feel good, too. I find that really rewarding. Other

hobbies are kick-boxing and horseback riding. Most of all, I love my Harley.

Keller: How long have you been riding Harleys.

Madusa: I've been riding Harleys for years. just got a brand new Harley, a Heritage Soft Tail and I have it custom painted pink. It's awesome

Keller: What's in your future besides the fitness videos you mentioned earlier?

Madusa: Well, I've always had a lot of things going on. I tried to get into WCW. I was already a package and all they had to do was take the package and run with it. And I just don't understand why they couldn't have done that with some woman. I got so frustrated. I had the whole package. When I went to WCW, I mailed them a press kit. It was a phenomenal bio press kit. It was a folder full of my bios and resumes and pictures and everything I have ever done and accomplished. And everybody in WCW said "We've never had anybody deliver something like this."

What was in there was all of my accomplishments in the wrestling field. I'm talking Japan and all that. When I went to WCW, I was stifled. Not only was my wrestling stifled, but my other personal side of business that I gave to them to have them run, there were a few people on the inside on the other side trying to do something with it and they couldn't do anything with it. I felt lost and frustrated and what I'm getting down to is that I had ideas and opportunities to make fitness videos for a long time. Now I'm doing that. I'm doing it on my own. It seems like if I take charge on my own, I can get things done, but if I left it to the company's hands, it never got done.

Keller: Do you think the WWF would handle your career differently?

Madusa: Now, if I would have gone to New York, I think Vince would have jumped on it and done twenty different things with it. I'm just saying that because Vince is a marketing genius. I've met the man once and I couldn't tell you what kind of man he is other than he was pleasant and cordial... and muscular (laughs). That was about it. I believe, just from what I see of the business and things, the WWF is going nowhere. I don't care what situation they're in or what people like to perceive as bad things, the WWF is not going to go down. They might have bad times or this or that, but they're not going anywhere. In my fitness videos that I'm doing, I'm just finishing up, wrapping up. We'll start shooting a movie, "Shoot Fighter." Terry Funk is in it. It's high-action, not martial arts, but there's a lot involved. The character of mine is really heelish. I'm a villain. Every woman who goes to Hollywood wants to be a star, but the key to it is the villains in movies who you love to hate. But if you think about it, it's the same thing in wrestling. It's a hand in hand thing, it's my niche, it's me. It's very creative. It's great.

DUTCH MANTELL

Dutch Mantell, who is currently wrestling and commentating for Smoky Mountain Wrestling part time, has travelled many roads in this business. In the first part of this two-part "Torch Talk" interview with Mantell, he discusses his career, his dreams, his color commentary, and his philosophy on the business of wrestling. The interview was conducted via phone on Jan. 15, 1993.

Keller: When you were on national TV with WCW World Wide and now with Smoky Mountain Wrestling, you have been complimented as a strong color commentator. Did you realize you had that talent to not only add color and credibility to a match, but be witty for an entire hour?

Mantell: That is a trait that can be directly attributed to those long, long boring trips that wrestlers are subjected to. Nothing is worse than going on a trip with a bunch of boring sonofabitches. You have to do something to shorten the time, so that's where all the bull comes from. When Richard Prior made it big, he was doing stuff he did in the pool room. The stuff I do is the same stuff I did in the car, I just take the cussing out. I take anything that is off-color out. People enjoy it because it's loose. People always enjoy good bullsh—, I don't care who they are. It's because it lightens the mood. Wrestling doesn't have to be, "I'm gonna kill you and rip your eyeballs out." Shoot, that would turn me off if I heard it. I don't want to hear that. I just make it light and breezy. When I would go to the production meeting, I didn't half way listen to it because there is no need for me to listen to it. Unless there is something that actually has to be put in there—and they'll tell me—then I just sit there and do it. I just wing it. I don't write nothing down, I don't have any cue cards. I just do it. It's just conversations I've had on the road, and talking with my wife, of course. She is very witty. I do get a lot of stuff from her.

Keller: Are your long term plans to stay in the wrestling business?

Mantell: You can't get out of it. Well, you can get out of it, but you're always attracted back to it because somebody will call you. Twenty years of my life has been wrapped up in wrestling, so you know a lot of people in it. I may not be employed in it, but I will always be a part of it.

Keller: Is your goal to always be employed in wrestling?

Mantell: That really can't be my goal because I'm not really currently employed in it. I do some independent shows in the Nashville area, fund raisers and stuff. That can be a quick way to the

poor house, too. Just like wrestling, promoting is an art to get right. You need a sponsor and you need to get the word out.

Keller: What is one key change you have seen in your years in the wrestling business that you wish could be taken back?

Mantell: Well, just for the sake of the wrestlers, to have some place for more of them to make a living. There's no place for them to go anymore with the national expansion of the WWF. I think Vince (McMahon) is a genius. He saw a spot for (expansion) and moved at just the right time. But I think that probably helped the wrestling business hit a boom, but for every action there is a reaction. So for every high there is an equal low. I think it will come back, but I don't think it will come back like it did. The only thing I would take back is the overexpansion of it. Vince saw the opening and went for it, but put a lot of guys out of work. But they were going to have to get out of it someday anyway, so maybe it just sped up the process a little bit.

Keller: Who were some of the people you looked up to in the wrestling business?

Mantell: This is before I became so jaded? One of the greatest workers I ever saw was Dicky Steinborn in Georgia. He was the smoothest, greatest wrestler I've ever seen. I remember some of the greatest matches I ever saw were between Jody Hamilton, the Assassin, and Dick Steinborn in Atlanta. They were classics that went 40 minutes, 55 minutes, not just 10 or 15. This is when they used all the psychology, when they had the fans standing and crying. I mean, if you watched it, you actually believed it. It was that good. Jody Hamilton weighed 300 pounds and he could dropkick. I wish I had some of it on tape. He was the best big man I saw, really. I've always said you can't learn to work unless you become a serious student of the business. You have to watch it. I've been in a lot of territories. Guys would break into the business, but they'd never go out and watch the matches. They'd wrestle their match and then come sit in the dressing room and bullsh—. I've always hated sitting around the locker room anyway. I always watch all of the matches. I had to compete against them anyway. I would say, "If I'm going to stay here, I'm going to have to do something a little bit different." I wasn't overly big, I didn't have a great body. But there was one thing I had, so I became Mr. Hustle. I did everything 110 percent. When I was told to do something, there was no big argument. Hell, I was glad to have a job. I could have been out digging a ditch. Instead, I'm riding around town in a Cadillac. People are asking for my autograph or calling me a sonofabitch, depending on whether I was a babyface or a heel. I thought it was a great deal. I appreciated it. Heck, from a mental attitude, I was just happy to be alive. I worked a deal where I was in the business just one year and they asked me to go an hour. It was a boost of confidence

that the booker thought I had the ability and talent to do that. I don't know if I could do it today. I could, but I'd have to utilize every trick in the book to do it now. Then I didn't have to use every trick in the book. It was just one whole hour of just digging, one high spot, one routine, one bump—this, that, and the other after another. We held the people for a whole hour. The guy who booked it, Tom Renesto, never said a word to me, so by his silence, that was an endorsement for it. When something was bad, he'd say something. A lot of guys would say, "Hey, he must not have liked it." But I understood him. A lot of guys hated him. They said he lied to them. He never lied to me. I learned a lot from him, too. You see, you learn a lot when you go up and down the road, when you make yourself a serious student of the business.

Whether you agree with something or you don't agree with something, you still listen to it and draw your own conclusions. You develop your own style. A lot of guys now want to get in there and emulate somebody else. A lot of guys sound like Willie Nelson and so they want to imitate Willie Nelson. But how many Willie Nelsons can the market bear? One. And he's already got it. The guys need an entirely different deal. My name, "Dirty" Dutch, I picked that up in Puerto Rico. Then I came back. I had the hat. I picked up the bullwhip, I concocted the story, and I became the character. That's how I did it. Now I see guys going around with a bullwhip. Hell, I saw Nick Bockwinkel with a bullwhip one time. I said, "What the hell is he doing?" Bill Irwin got the bullwhip. Then Black Bart got the bullwhip. Then I thought of changing my deal, going to the ring with a chain saw. Then see if others followed going to the ring with a chainsaw themselves. Even my commentary, I never try to copy anyone else. I don't copy Bobby Heenan. He has his own deal. Paul E. Dangerously has his own deal. Jesse Ventura has his own deal. Larry Zbyszko has his. And I've got mine. If I was trying to copy them and they were trying to copy me, then somebody's going to overlap, right? Somebody's going to be a carbon copy of somebody else. And the people are going to see that. So that's why my style is more laid back. I'm not really good on the one-liners where Cornette is good on the one-liners. I may take a one-liner and turn it into a little story with a little jump at the end. That's the way I do it.

Keller: You do come up with some good one-liners, too.

Mantell: Well, some are clichéish as hell, but sometimes they fit the deal. You've only got so many you can use, anyway. It's timing and delivery. Tony Schiavone used to say things and I would respond, "Tony, that hurt my feelings." Now you don't expect to hear that. "What do you mean I hurt your feelings," he would say. Then I'd go, "When you say things like that, it just bothers me."

Keller: You two worked well together. Did you like working with him?

Mantell: I loved him. I think they made a real mistake when they busted us up. You're either in the clique or you're not. With Dusty Rhodes, I respect him a lot for his mind. I've been in Florida with him, and—oh brother—when he'd walk to the ring, those people would stand up. He had a presence. He had an awe about him, especially in those days. It was magical. But I've never been one of Dusty's guys. I've been in territories with him twice and I've been slammed twice. The second time I knew it was coming.

Keller: Is that one of Dusty's faults, being set on people who he is familiar with?

Mantell: All bookers do it.

Keller: Was that Dusty's biggest fault, or was it finishes, or something else?

Mantell: Yeah, he'd do that. The thing is, these people he used and the finishes he did, the people had already seen it because he's already been on national TV. He's got an M.O. about him and he does that. It would work in the older days because people hadn't seen it. But now there is nothing the fans haven't seen. All they can do is change personnel. I had a lot of problems with my commentary in Atlanta. They told me I couldn't acknowledge anybody's history. Not in so many words, but I'd ask, "Can I mention he was in the WWF?" And they'd say, "No." It was no big deal. I'd say, "What about this," and they'd say, "No, don't mention that." A pattern developed and there were more things I couldn't say than I could say. That made it really hard. In Atlanta, I only had one show a week to do. Now we do three at a time. You start digging toward the end of that third hour. I have done four before. Four shows in one night, which is difficult. But then the consummate professional I am, I battle through it.

Keller: Have you enjoyed working with Schiavone in WCW or Caudle in SMW more?

Mantell: It's like comparing apples and oranges.

Keller: How is Caudle different? You two work well together, too.

Mantell: It's a different environment. I make them look good. They don't realize that. Tony never realized that. I made him look good. I've seen him with other people and they don't make him look as good as I do. When I started in WCW, we went up to Indianapolis. I really liked Tony. He's got a great sense of humor and he's funny, if you get him away from the business. When he's all wrapped up in the business, he's not quite so funny sometimes. There was a lot of animosity and dissension at the time. Almost as an afterthought, I said, "Tony, when are we going to do some commentary together." I think he just dismissed it. I don't even know why I said it. And he walked off.

About an hour later, he came up to me and said, "We need you to start doing commentary next

week." Ole was booking and he was scheduled to be the color commentator. I called up Ole and he said, "Listen, I can't be up on the set and back in the dressing rooms at the same time. I want you to go out there. Tony has recommended you. I've never heard you, but what the hell. Just go out there and do it. Goddamn it, you know what to do. You're not a damn idiot. Just talk about the match and what's coming up." You don't take offense at Ole. That's just the way he talks. I didn't start until the next week. I think there was some debate whether they wanted me to start or not. I started doing it and lasted about ten months. Then Dusty came in and I was out the door. He said (imitating Dusty), "Dutch, I like your commentary, you see, but we're trying to get more talking about wrestling."

I've heard all of that hype before. But I think they made a mistake to replace me with Gordon Solie. I respect Gordon for his announcing, but he's a straight man and Tony's a straight man. So they put two straight men on the same show. People used to ask me, "Why did they put Gordon in there? Now they're not fun to listen to." They said they listened to the show to hear what I had to say. That's always fun to hear. When I worked with Charlie Platt in Continental—now there is the driest guy in the world. I liked Charlie. He wouldn't feed me. You've got to feed me, throw stuff at me. That's what I tell Bob. Sometimes Bob steps all over me, he feeds me so much. Tony would feed me. I'd say, "Tony say this, and I'll say this." And he would.

Many times Tony had to take off his headset because he was laughing so hard. I would just continue to call the match and he'd eventually come back. I told Tony I didn't want to be like Jim Ross and Paul E. Dangerously. They were too busy trying to one-up each other. I respect both of them. But they were too busy picking on each other. Sometimes the match would take a back seat to their commentary. Ross was not going to take a back seat to Dangerously. Dangerously was always trying to get him. Sometimes Ross would actually get mad.

Keller: If you hadn't gotten involved in pro wrestling, would you have pursued a career in the media?

Mantell: Probably. Either that or business, probably. I had a business when I was in high school, a maintenance firm. It was very small, just a one man operation. I was making like—this was when the minimum wage was about a dollar and a quarter an hour. I was making like \$75 a week and working three hours a week. Sometimes you don't know when you've got it good. I said, "I hate this stuff." All I had to do was go in and scrub floors and ceilings and stuff like that. It was basically one of the only jobs I had. I could pick my own hours. Some places I'd clean twice a week and sometimes once a week. Three hours was the actual working time plus driving. It was \$75 a week. I would either be doing that or be in radio or sales.

I think they've missed the boat on Cactus Jack for a long time. I think Brian Pillman is a much better heel than babyface. I think the best guy they've got down there right now is Barry Windham. The way he looks, the way he works, he knows what he's doing. He's got that attitude. I tell you, I'm really impressed by Vader.

Keller: Is there anything in your career that you would take back?

Mantell: A lot of it. It's been just bad timing. I went to Charlotte one time and didn't stay. I don't know why I did that. I was nuts. It was a bad year my father died. That was 1980, a really bad year. Then some other personal things happened and it affected my business. There are a lot of things I would take back. Sometimes I wish I had a crystal ball and could foresee some things happening. I wish I had a market analyst telling me what the trend was so I could get in on it. You either hit it or you don't. If you miss it completely, you go back and revise what you have and try again. That's what life's all about.

Keller: Did being in Vietnam affect you dramatically later in life?

Mantell: I was there '70-'71. While you are there, you are just fighting for your life. That's part of it. I think you're almost impervious—you're not in shock—but you block it out. You're too busy trying to survive. You're trying to get out of there with your body in tact. If the other guy gets his arm shot off, you feel bad for him. If he gets killed you really feel bad, especially if he is a friend of yours. It's sort of hard to be in that situation and not have close friends because you were endangering your life. Everyday. You could be in the base camp. They can get you anywhere. That's why so many came back drug addicted. That's what they had to do to get through it. Even when I came back, I smoked dope and did all of that sh--. When I got back, I was 27, 28 years old, and I put all of that dope down. I haven't smoked a joint since then. I've drank very few beers. I don't drink anymore. I don't do drugs anymore—not that marijuana was ever a serious drug anyway. I put it all down. I said, "Hell, there's more to life."

Keller: How long did it take for you to drop that stuff from your lifestyle?

Mantell: A couple years after I got back. But

anyway, I look at life a little bit differently.

Keller: Were there any positives about being there that have helped you since then?

Mantell: You find out a lot about yourself. You find out what you can do if you have to do it. I'm a lot like other Vietnam veterans, I don't talk about it a lot. They've blocked it out so much. When you get into Vietnam, you get into the politics, you get into political agendas, and this and that. You realize how much you were used a pawn for something that really didn't amount to a whole lot of beans anyway.

A lot of guys have lost their lives in that bullsh—. The people who fought that war were poor people and blacks. That's who really fought the war. People with money did not go unless they volunteered. All the guys I knew were from down south and blacks from up north, a lot of Hispanics. A lot of who they call the disenfranchised. That's who fought the war. Let's talk about wrestling.

Keller: In what areas of the country have you wrestled?

Mantel: Atlanta, Oregon, Charlotte, Tennessee, Pensacola, Mobile, the old Continental area, Texas, and Kansas City. They called me one time to go to Calgary. I declined that. They called me one time to go to Oregon and I declined that, too. I said, "Hell, that's just too damn far to go. At the time I was making \$400 a week and thought I was starving to death. I asked, "What are you guys making?" And they said, "Oh, four or five hundred a week." I said, "Hell, if I'm gonna start at that, I'm gonna start close to home."

I've never had any inclination to go to the West Coast. I never wanted to go to Oregon or L.A. I never wanted to go to Japan, I just got booked over there a couple times. It never was a burning desire for me to go to Japan. They have so many offices over there. I went over there in '82 and I guess I got three grand a week to go over there. A new office called me the other week and they offered me \$1,200. I said, "Hey, I went over there ten years ago for three grand and now you're offering me a thousand?" They said, "Well, the business has changed." I said, "Hell, I can make as much sitting out here." Why should I go over there and take a chance working that shoot style?

Keller: Did you work the shoot-style the last time you were there?

Mantel: Yeah. I went over there one time with Hashima and Maeda and all of those damn sonafaguns. He gave me a damn spinning heel kick and knocked my head off. Hell, I just thought they couldn't work, that they were just stiffer than hell. Then, about three days later somebody came up to me and said, "Hey, you know this is a shoot group." I had been there a few days and just thought they were stiffer than hell.

Keller: You've been to Puerto Rico, too. Have you wrestled in any other areas overseas?

Mantel: Of course Canada, Mexico. I've been to Trinidad, Barbados, Bahamas, Antigua. I don't have any desire to go to foreign countries. Anytime you step your foot off American soil, you're taking your chances. Going to Japan is not so bad because they're a civilized country. If you go to Trinidad, they're a fairly prosperous country, but I didn't have any desire to go down there. The rules here don't work there. If you're an American then hell. Anytime I've been in a foreign country, I've been nervous. I don't know why.

Keller: What still amazes you about this business?

Mantel: I've seen more guys that just show up and disappear. You never hear from them again. It's just like a knock in the night. They're there and then they're gone. You don't know where they came from or where they went. Nor could you probably ever find out. The thing about wrestling is no records are ever kept. Say I knew a guy in Florida in 1974 or '76, whenever I was down there a couple of times. Unless somebody else knew him or remembered him, there's no records of where this guy is. He is just a non-entity. He doesn't exist anymore.

Keller: It might take a private investigator to find him and it might take six months.

Mantel: Well, I don't know if I want to find anybody that bad, but I doubt even he could find him. Hell, you have to have somewhere to start. How many wrestlers do you think have come and gone over 20 years? I doubt anyone could find him. Unless a record was kept with his social security number, I doubt if you could find any of the wrestlers who have come and gone.

Keller: Do you like being recognized?

Mantel: In Nashville, here, a lot of people know me. I can go places where I've never been before in my life. People will say, "Hi, Dutch, how ya' doin'?" I have never seen them before and I will probably never see them again. But they've seen me on TV for 15 years and they all remember me. A lot of people look at you and don't say anything, but they know who you are. That's one good thing, that a lot of people know who I am. Well, unless I want to rob a bank, then that's bad.

Keller: Unless you gave yourself a crew cut and shaved your beard.

Mantel: Then people wouldn't know me. Hell, Bill Irwin cut his hair one time. He was in the territory. He had cut his hair and mustache. I said, "Who the hell is that geek running around?" That was in Baltimore. He kept running around talking to wrestlers. I thought he was some new guy they hired for the souvenir stands or something. I said, "Who the hell is that?" They said, "That's Bill Irwin." He looked entirely different. I

embarrassed myself, I knew who it was then.

Keller: What don't you like about wrestling now?

Mantel: I don't enjoy being in the business as much as I used to. I don't miss the travelling. I was in Mid-South with Watts, I was making good money. I liked Bill Watts. He's always been a hard guy to work for, but he was always fair. If you had a problem he would talk with you about it. I've seen him go off and raise hell. I guess his temperament had to do with his religious affiliation that week. Some weeks he would be religious and the next week he'd just be the opposite. He would take God's name in vain. It would depend on his religious affiliation that week.

When I was there, my god, I had never travelled so much in my life. If I made a 200 mile trip one way, it was like a day off. Most of the trips were 300, 350 miles. It was all two-lane highways. There were interstates in Louisiana. We always had one headlight missing, the windshield was cracked because of rocks hitting the car. It was rough. I don't miss travelling a bit. I don't miss flying, either. Actually, I like wrestling (laughs), I just don't want to travel.

Keller: How about just wrestling in your back yard and have people from all over travel to see you?

Mantel: Yeah. That's what they did with country music, you know. They've got a place in Missouri where, not the big stars who go out on the road for big, big money, but the older stars have set up theaters and places there. They don't travel. They just live there and they just go down there twice a day, do a show, and go back home. People travel to see them. Of course, if you're a big star, it's not selling the tickets, it's selling the gimmicks and souvenirs.

After every show, they go out into the lobby and sit there and sign their stuff. It's really cheap out there. The motels are not expensive and the food is not expensive. It's almost killed Nashville's tourism business for country music. That's what they do, but I don't think wrestlers could do that.

Keller: Is it still as fun to actually wrestle in the ring as it used to be?

Mantel: Not any more because half of them don't know what they're doing. I'm from the old school, and I look at the ring psychology, I look at the crowd reaction, the personality, the whole package. Some of the wrestlers who are regarded as great just wrestle. What gets me about some of these fans is they go crazy over these wrestlers with beautiful moves, but I think they're going to get killed. It's not only the guy doing the moves, but it's the guy catching him. It's the guy catching him keeping him from getting killed. That's the guy taking the chance, because he's the one putting his body on the line, but people never talk about that guy.

Keller: Are you happy with the money you made in the smaller territories most of your career?

Mantel: I made a lot of money in the territories. It's not what I could have made in WCW or the WWF. In those days, it was a real cliquish environment. If you didn't bust that clique, you didn't get the money. And it was really tough to bust into the clique. Very few times have I really busted that clique. That goes back to politicking. For lack of a better word, it's called "ass kissing." One thing you have to remember about ass kissing is you have to be kissing the tight one because if that changes at any time and the next guy comes in and you didn't kiss him, he will remember that.

Keller: What are your thoughts on Ole Anderson?

Mantel: Ole Anderson, I love him to death. To me, he's the finniest son of a bitch in the world. He talks a mile a minute. He's really old school, a hardcore son of a bitch. I bet he threatened to fire about five times. He used to come up to me and say, "See that guy over there?" He was pointing to Sting. I'd say, "Yeah." He'd say, "I can't fire him. But you? I can fire you in a minute's notice. Just remember that."

I wasn't sure, because he had a dry sense of humor, whether he liked and respected me or he really meant it. He seemed serious to me. I had a conversation with Ole one time. I was eating. He sat down and said, "I want to talk to you, you son of a bitch. I want to tell you something." He kept talking and then finally asked me a question. Well, my mouth was full and I was trying to swallow my food, but before I could do that, he started talking again.

He said, "You say you don't care." I do say that. I say I don't care. He said, "But I know you care because I care. We all care." He was talking a mile a minute, right? And then he asked me another question. My mouth was full again. I tried to quickly answer, but he didn't stop. He asked me another question and before I could answer, he answered it for me. But this time, when he answered it for me,—and in his own mind it is now answered, all of the questions he asked me—but he got mad at his own answers. He ended up swearing at me and told me to do what I wanted and walked off. I never said a word in the entire three minute conversation. I like Ole a lot.

Keller: What is your most memorable moment in your career?

Mantel: The first sellout I was ever the main event in. It was in Puerto Rico. It was awesome, in front of about 20,000, maybe 15,000. It was great that that many people would actually come. I don't know exactly how many it was, but they were standing everywhere. They always put the main event on fourth. It was just unreal. I had to get there at 5:30 in the afternoon to get in. Me and my partner Frankie Lane fought Carlos Color and Fiden Castillo. In Puerto Rico, you had to fight

for your life. Nobody knows how to work. They'd beat the sh-- out of you. I was in other sellouts, too, but not quite like that one. My biggest week down there was \$3,700 over three days. It was unreal. That was all right.

Keller: Do you have anything you would like to say about the Brulser Brody murder? You were there that night and have spoken about it before.

Mantel: No. I want to put that behind me. The only thing is, a lot of people don't know the story. I'm going to do this very briefly. I got a subpoena on it to appear (at the trial of accused murderer Jose Gonzales). They said they would send me a plane ticket. I've still got the subpoena. The trial was going to start on the 22nd or 23rd of January and I got the subpoena on the 24th of January. Actually, I knew the verdict of the trial when the subpoena came. It was mailed the 13th of January and I think I got it 11 days later. Everything in Puerto Rico is behind, like the third world.

Keller: What did you think of Brody?

Mantel: I never knew him. I was never in a territory with him. Actually, I met him in Japan and he was okay. He didn't say a lot, but he was an intelligent guy if you could get him to talk.

Keller: Tell me about your family? Do you have any sons or daughters?

Mantel: I have two daughters. Don't remind me. One's 21 and the other's going to be 19.

Keller: Do you see anyone around today who will be a big drawing card ten years from now?

Mantel: If he was exploited well... I think they've missed the boat on Cactus Jack for a long time. I think Brian Pillman is a much better heel than babyface. I think the best guy they've got down there right now is Barry Windham. The way he looks, the way he works, he knows what he's doing. He's not all muscled up. He's got that attitude about him. I tell you, I'm really impressed by Vader.

Keller: What do you think of Sting?

Mantel: I like Sting. Sting's got it. I don't care if you've got it or not, it's got to be exploited or brought out. Actually, I think there are a number of guys still left who you could do a lot of things with. It's not the quarterback, it's the coach.

Keller: What about Undertaker?

Mantel: When you get cast in a role, you get so stereotyped it's tough to ever break from it. It would be hard for him to get into a light-hearted role.

Keller: Is he like his character behind the scenes?

Mantel: Dark, foreboding? Yeah, he can be. I think when you get in character so long, it becomes you. He doesn't say a lot anyway. He's not a great conversationalist. He's really intelligent. That's just his way.

REFLECTIONS

Phil Mushnick: I like Phil Mushnick. Some people see Mushnick as a self-righteous opportunist, exploiting controversial situations he doesn't understand for an opportunity to seem holier than thou. I saw Phil's approach, be it covering pro wrestling scandals or criticizing shoe companies for charging over a hundred dollars for shoes that cost a fraction of that make thanks to paying pennies per hour to overseas workers, as an honest attempt to catch people who are often admired for their power doing dishonest or unethical things.

What's fascinating about the two Torch Talks with Mushnick is his outsider's approach to the business. When U.S. wrestling fans (or U.S. wrestlers for that matter) see good lucha libre wrestling for the first time, they are often aghast at the lack of realism, the lack of selling, the cooperative nature of the moves. They don't realize that they are conditioned to look past aspects of the U.S. style that are just as outrageous or fake looking.

Mushnick looked at the wrestling industry with shock and dismay and saw things those of us who think about it and watch it daily don't notice anymore.

Most of all I admired Mushnick because he doesn't hero worship. There are so many people in this business—fans, writers, wrestlers, etc.—who look past despicable character traits or lapses in good judgement because the person happens to be good at wrestling, or worse is someone in wrestling who talks to them. And Mushnick criticized not only sports targets, but his own colleagues for their blind-eye toward many problems that aren't pretty to write about.

Mushnick cuts through the starry-eyed approach of many mainstream journalists ("I can't believe I'm actually interviewing Michael Jordan!") and simply looks at who is being decent and who isn't.

Mushnick's writings in the *New York Post* had a great influence on the changes in the WWF's business approach—both the lack of steroids and the movement away from targeting kids as their primary audience.

Charlie Norris: Charlie Norris is now wrestling in Dallas, Tex. for the CWA, trying to keep his career afloat and looking for the next big break. This interview was conducted right before he went to work for WCW. After leaving WCW, he sued them for discrimination. WCW said he couldn't wrestle, didn't strive to improve, smoke and drank and didn't work out, and was poor behind the mic. Norris said he wasn't given a chance and was told to do things embarrassing to his culture on camera, although many of those same things he did on his own independently while trying to get noticed.

In this short, honest interview, Norris talks about his tryouts with the WWF and his goal of making it in WCW.

PHIL MUSHNICK

Phil Mushnick, sports columnist with the New York Post, has covered the TitanGate scandals with more frequency and depth than any other mainstream newspaper journalist. In the following "Torch Talk" conducted June 6, 1993 via telephone, Mushnick talks about the lawsuit the WWF recently served him and the Post. He also talks about his background leading up to his coverage of the WWF scandals.

Wade Keller: Before the Dr. Zahorian trial, had you written much about pro wrestling?

Phil Mushnick: No. Well, I've done columns on wrestling before the Zahorian thing. My column, for the most part, especially 10, 12 years ago was on television and radio criticism. I would get on people's rear ends. Like Warner Wolfe, a sportscaster in New York on the CBS O&O (owned and operated) and Spencer Christian who worked for ABC's O&O, WABC, and they would punctuate their nightly sportscasts with wrestling highlights. That bothered me because you wouldn't get legitimate scores and highlights or any kinds of insight, but if some guy was parading around in the wrestling ring, it became part of the news, even though there was nothing newsworthy about it. I got on those guys about it, and frankly, I got them to stop.

Keller: Were you ever a wrestling fan?

Mushnick: I was a wrestling fan as a kid, but it seemed different then. It seemed to be a very simple passion play. As I started watching it (recently), not religiously, but breezing through it, it seemed to incorporate every possible ethnic negative stereotype, religious stereotype, gender stereotype, all negative, in addition to the graphic violence. Whatever the down culture or ethnicity of the culture at the time was exploited. If we were at war with Panama, there sure enough would be a Panamanian bad guy in the ring or something. That stuff bothered the crap out of me.

Keller: When you were younger, what was it that attracted you as a fan?

Mushnick: I don't know whether I was attracted to it per se. I probably went through my fling between the ages of 10 and 13. Saturday nights I was in the house, and yet I was old enough to stay up a little later. I ended up watching wrestling from Washington. Brute Bernard and Skull Murphy were "bad guys," but they were self-evident "bad guys." Arnold Skaaland was a "good guy." I also didn't like the way they embraced celebrities and the way celebrities embraced the WWF in return, just for the exposure. Why would you want to be part of

that if you've got a Beverly Brothers work where kids are chanting "faggots"? Look into this stuff a little deeper, guys.

Keller: How many columns did you do on wrestling before the Zahorian trial?

Mushnick: On wrestling, per se, probably none. One sportscaster who would embrace wrestling, just as filler, just to titillate and basically be lazy, I probably wrote paragraphs a dozen times (about him). Spencer Christian at one point didn't want to cover St. Johns in the final four because of Wrestlemania. That was bothersome to me. Frankly, it was disturbing.

Keller: Some would say, concerning your words about violence and stereotypes, that "it's only wrestling. What's the big deal?"

Mushnick: Of course. I understand that. Is it good? No. Will it shake the earth from its foundation? Again, no. However, it bothered me at a time when everybody in this country seems to be selling violence. Suddenly wrestling, as Vince McMahon provided it, seemed to be at the cutting edge for children. I found it more and more to be a kind of child abuse; clearly a kind of child abuse.

Keller: What was it about the Zahorian trial that made you break your pattern of not covering wrestling?

Mushnick: What bothered me was clearly I was cognizant of a steroid epidemic in this country. I had written about steroids many, many times going back—probably six years. It was pretty clear to me the WWF had become swollen on steroids. You looked at these guys in the ring and you knew you were seeing unnatural bodies. What bothered me at that point, I had taken kind of a media stance on it, when Hogan was dismissed from the trial—and to this day I can't understand the logic or the jurisprudence of the judge who dismissed him because it might be injurious to his (Hogan's career). Before Michael Jordan, there was Hulk Hogan. I would say for a ten year stretch, Hulk Hogan was probably the number one marketing tool/role model in the country. There wasn't a kid's room in the country that didn't have Hulk Hogan merchandise and this guy was a drug addict. This guy was absolutely swollen on illegal drugs, yet he was selling kids vitamins. It was going on all over the country. It was just horrible.

Keller: How much at first did you cover of the Zahorian trial?

Mushnick: What I covered of the trial was that after Hogan was dismissed, the story disappeared. It disturbed me that he was dismissed and that as soon as the sexiest figure, the most romantic figure in the trial was dismissed, all the stories disappeared. I said, "Wait a second, what happened to the media here? I mean, isn't there a larger, broader responsibility here. If the World Wrestling

Federation, renowned as America's probably most preeminent babysitter, is just pervaded by steroids and other illegal drugs, that's a big story. It struck me that once again pro wrestling would escape critical overview or critical analysis because it doesn't fit comfortably on any shelf within a mainstream newspaper's or television station's newsroom.

Keller: How would you rate the media's coverage of the Zahorian trial while they covered it?

Mushnick: I read a couple of paragraphs in the *New York Times*. The *New York Post* didn't have anything there. I didn't even know this trial was going on until I happened to read about it in the *Times*. Then, when I wanted to read more, it was all gone. Then I found out it was all gone because Hogan was dismissed. That Hogan might testify in the *New York Times* was worth a 20 paragraph story. That Zahorian was sentenced was worth 2 paragraphs.

Keller: How much do other sports writers covering other sports protect the sport they cover from scandalous coverage?

Mushnick: I think if a baseball beat writer covering 25 guys on a roster were to have some empirical knowledge that 20 of those 25 guys are doing illegal drugs, and if he or she didn't write that story, he or she should be fired.

Keller: Are there some parallel stories in the case of NFL beat writers?

Mushnick: That's a good question. I don't know. Maybe it's a tremendous leap of faith to think the average sportswriter looks at the human condition and says, "That's an unnatural body versus that's a natural body"... At least in the NFL (compared to the WWF), there's a premise or a pretense that there are some safeguards in place, a players' union, a leagues' office, a commissioner with no perceived prejudice in favor of or against any team or individual. As opposed to an autonomous, almost monopolistic, faux-sport/entertainment entity as the World Wrestling Federation.

Keller: Have you seen any similar examples in the mainstream press covering mainstream sports where somebody really went after a problem within one of the sports when other writers weren't covering it and then no one picked up on the story even after it was made public?

Mushnick: At the risk of sounding self-serving and self-absorbed, I do this all the time. I got into the whole 900 phone number scams as it relates to sports, autographs as it relates to sports, how the World Series shouldn't be played at 9 o'clock Eastern time so kids can get a shot at it. These are the kinds of things I go after. I think what makes me a successful columnist is I tread where others are either too lazy or for some reason disinclined to go. I've reached a point in my career where I

really don't give a rat's tail what Lawrence Taylor has to say after a game or anyone else for that matter. You're not going to read my column for that. I don't care what they have to say. No offense to them. I'm looking for something that challenges the reader to think a little more.

Keller: What's the most gratifying issue you've written about?

Mushnick: The most gratifying was the whole sneaker issue which I first brought to light, selling them to kids for \$150 that are made for 12 cents (overseas). That's child abuse. A true sports hero says, "I'll (sponsor) the \$40 ones, you'll still make your money." The most gratifying response I'll get is, "At first I thought you were full of sh—, and now as time has passed and I've given this a think and I realize that hundreds of millions of dollars are done in advertising and it's not done on the blind, it's done with market research. These people, the manufacturers know how much people are spending, who's buying it, and how often." So when people tell me I was out front on this thing and not following, (that's gratifying).

Keller: Are you immune to criticism and if not, what is the best criticism of what you have written?

Mushnick: It's a valid criticism to label me self-righteous. And yet, on the flip side of that kind of characterization, who else is there to be self-righteous about. I also say, "Catch me if you can." I've always said catch me if you can. I avoid all conflicts of interest as they relate to money. Emotional ones I can't help but have.

Keller: Compare the WWF's media relations with you compared to other groups or people you have criticized.

Mushnick: If the quotes from Steve Planamenta are accurate, and I am thinking of one in particular in a Mike Mooneyham column, Steve is perfect for the WWF. He is an inveterate liar. I wonder what it is Steve thinks he's going to be doing for the rest of his life after the WWF. This is a guy who has taken great pains to destroy his own credibility.

Keller: How does the WWF's overall handling of media criticism compare to other organizations you criticize?

Mushnick: It's a matter of degrees with the WWF's bend on these things clearly being the worst I've ever encountered. Wade, let me make something clear to you, I've covered some bad guys. I've covered George Steinbrenner. I'm not a big fan of Donald Trump. I've covered some guys who are tough to deal with like Reggie Jackson. But Vince McMahon and the World Wrestling Federation are off the charts. They are beyond anything I've ever encountered, anything I could have in my worst nightmare imagined would be out there. They're it.

Keller: What are some of the charges in the

If the World Wrestling Federation, renowned as America's probably most preeminent babysitter, is just pervaded by steroids and other illegal drugs, that's a big story. It struck me that once again pro wrestling would escape critical overview or critical analysis because it doesn't fit comfortably on any shelf within a mainstream newspaper's or television station's newsroom.

WWF's lawsuit that you find ridiculous?

Mushnick: That somehow my refusal to meet with Vince McMahon is somehow pivotal. I've never met with anyone in this story. I've never met Tom Cole, I've never met Dave Meltzer, or Wade Keller, or Bruno Sammartino, or Superstar Billy Graham, or Tom Hankins. Another is that I single-handedly tried to destroy the image of wrestling as wholesome family entertainment.

Keller: Is there anything in the lawsuit with validity?

Mushnick: It's loaded with half-truths. They said I depended on ex-convicts as my sources. The World Wrestling Federation, I've found, is loaded with ex-convicts, which is either a coincidence or another way to leverage employees. If there's any truth in any of these counts, I haven't found it yet.

Keller: Does the reputation of the *Post* hurt your credibility?

Mushnick: I think that broad image probably does exist. I'm sure it does. I've been with the *Post* since 1973. I've been recruited by every paper in the New York area. I've stayed with the *Post* out of a sense of loyalty and because I'm paid very well by them. They've never told me what to write, who to write it about, or how to write it. They've allowed me, I think, to develop a pretty strong reputation as an honest guy, a consumer activist, and a guy who can make a good living writing an honest column.

Keller: Could you write for the *New York Times* what you write for the *Post*?

Mushnick: I once got that promise from the *New York Times*, that the editors there would not mess with my style. Unfortunately, when we got that all ironed out, they offered me a \$15,000 pay

cut. They told me, "We have prestige." I said "Yeah, and I have a mortgage."

Keller: Do you think there is any obligation to have balanced coverage of pro wrestling? Should either you or someone else at the paper write about the good of wrestling or at least cover the major events in order to give balanced, fair coverage to wrestling?

Mushnick: You keep characterizing it as covering wrestling. If this were, say, something else outside the mainstream of sports, say the National Lacrosse League, and its top physician was sentenced to three-and-a-half years in the federal pen for dispensing drugs widely to everybody in the place and there was a sense that you couldn't get ahead unless you had the drugs that it was encouraged or at the very least indulged, I'd write it about the National Lacrosse League. That doesn't mean I'd then be obligated to cover their pay-per-view game. I don't see this as covering wrestling, I see this as covering a story.

Keller: Do you think your criticism would have more validity if the *New York Post* did have some straight coverage of results?

Mushnick: I don't even consider that.

Keller: Why single out the WWF when WCW has perhaps not addressed the steroid problem to the degree the WWF has?

Mushnick: I didn't wake up on Tuesday morning and say, "Hmmm, I think I'll get the WWF." Dr. Zahorian, who was a ringside physician and appeared on many WWF TV shows went to jail for three and a half years in a federal penitentiary. The grand jury records are full of WWF names and executives. If WCW suffers from this type of legal action, I'd like to know about it. I don't know about it. I wrote the steroid piece on Zahorian and within a week I got about 60 messages and the messages were from all over the country and they all said the same thing: Look into the WWF, you're not going to believe what else is going on. Had this been about WCW, I would have been right there. I've gotten some tickles along the way (about WCW). Bill Watts said all of these racist things. I got a tip. Next thing I know, he was gone. I was appalled that Hank Aaron appeared on these shows, but less appalled than I was to see Jesse Jackson to do a pat on the back of the WWF.

Keller: If many of the allegations are true, do you personally believe Vince McMahon knew of them?

Mushnick: If Vince didn't know everything, he knew an awful lot. Enough where it was incumbent on him to blow the whistle. Who knows why he didn't if he knew some of these things... Vince had an opportunity when these things first came out to set things right. Because he didn't leads me to think he was in on a lot of the craziness.

PHIL MUSHNICK

New York Post columnist Phil Mushnick, winner of *Village Voice's* 1992 Sportswriter of the Year, has been at the forefront of the New York media in covering the WWF scandals. His column in the *Post* goes after anything he believes to be corrupt, deceptive, or motivated by greed. One of his major pursuits in 1992 was exposing the WWF for what he believed were wrongdoings by the organization. Some even credit Mushnick as the main player, because of his vociferousness and exposure, in prompting the government's investigation of Titan Sports that led to the indictments days ago. His vociferousness and exposure also led to him being sued by the WWF for libel. The case is still pending.

On Nov. 21, 1994 Mushnick talked with *Torch* editor Wade Keller about the media and how it deals with controversies, such as those related to Titan Sports.

Keller: Are you satisfied with the coverage in New York of this past week's indictment of Vince McMahon and Titan Sports?

Mushnick: It strikes me as somewhat disappointing. No, make that flat-out disappointing that there was at least as much coverage given to the fact that I was being sued by the WWF as there was that the U.S. Attorney's Office had indicted them.

Back when I was writing these stories, it would have taken any half-decent reporter no more than a half hour to look into these things to find out that at the very least there was a modicum of truth to these matters. It would have taken a half hour. Instead, it was ignored. Then, on the day I was sued, it became a story only that I was being sued. Now the Feds indict McMahon for drug distribution, etc., and look at what the *New York Times* does, they run a four-paragraph box. Now, this is the same *New York Times* that several months ago when these allegations first sprang up afforded Vince McMahon a full op-ed page piece, it must have been 25 to 30 paragraphs in which McMahon spun a whole lot of nonsense about his father and how he stands for good wholesome family entertainment.

Also, in the *New York Times's* Connecticut edition, there was at least one major puff piece about all of the good deeds the WWF does, all in the face of these allegations.

Now on the day they get indicted, what does the *New York Times* see fit to run? Four paragraphs. I think in this town, journalists and newspapers become so chauvinistic that they would let a big story, an important story, fall through the cracks if it means chasing another newspaper's story or updating another

newspaper's story. I think that stinks. When I embark on a story that I've read or heard somewhere else, I credit the source and go from there.

Keller: What is the mentality that goes into knowing a story deserves coverage, and then not giving it coverage to spite a so-called competitor?

Mushnick: There is another law of journalism working here that we are both very much aware of, and that is it's very easy to dismiss anything sordid that happens in the professional wrestling business. As a whole it's very easy to dismiss as something that's not really happening. It's really a cartoon world, so these things can't be real. Or, they say it's so sleazy and so sordid that we wouldn't touch it. But that doesn't detract nor does it explain why something should be dismissed from critical examination or investigation because it's "too bad" or "it seems too unreal?" I don't think so. I think Vince McMahon's empire has been nurtured by the fact that professional wrestling doesn't fit comfortably on a shelf in any news department. It doesn't exist as pure entertainment and it doesn't exist as pure sport. There's nobody for the most part at a newspaper who covers something that falls somewhere in between.

I think it was the WWF's and WCW's practiced efforts to create that reality. Their idea of the media covering them is to have Bob Costas jump in the ring at Wrestlemania, but nobody's gonna be allowed inside after the act's over. They benefit from that. And they operate with impunity because of it.

Keller: How would you rate the coverage of the McMahon indictment and all of the facets and implications that may result compared to a story of similar magnitude, but not related to pro wrestling?

Mushnick: Considering that this is a huge business that is aimed for the most part at America's children, and this business put a premium—according to the Feds—at drug-enhanced muscles, selling this whole imagery to children, I don't think you can play it up big enough. It's an important story. After all, how many people now between the ages of 18 and 30 who are using steroids illegally got their initial inspiration as children watching the WWF. It's a hard thing to answer, but there are some. I think it's a huge story.

I think before any of this happened, the WWF was a huge story as it related to selling kids negative ethnic stereotypes, hate for homosexuals, graphic violence of a most disgusting nature—hitting guys with chairs and throwing them in bodybags. I remember it as a passion play as a kid where there was a certain amount of athleticism involved. Now it's just like teaching kids hate. The anti-Asian works they're doing now, I can't believe.

The WWF, until this indictment, has always

benefited from the fact that it's so cartoonish that it can't really be happening, and therefore it's not really happening, it's not really leaving its mark anywhere. But who are our most vulnerable citizens? It's our children. Those are the people they target... Anyone who would do anything to hurt a kid for the name of profit or celebrate or create a negative image for a kid to admire in the name of profit, I respectfully suggest that person should go straight to hell.

Keller: What causes reporters, such as Tony Spinelli did today in the *Connecticut Post*, to write puff-pieces on Vince McMahon when they have overwhelming evidence in front of them that there is more to the story than what he tells?

Mushnick: Channel 9 here in New York after it did that big work with Dr. DiPisqualli came back with a piece that basically celebrated the WWF as being in the forefront on the war on drugs. Everything's a quick soundbite.

Keller: You're around reports all the time. Take me into the mind of a reporter. Why would somebody sit down with facts in front of them and choose to portray in a gushingly favorable way somebody who the facts show should be held accountable for his inconsistencies, if not his lies?

Mushnick: It depends on the guy or gal who is doing the reporting. It depends on their intellect. It even goes to their parenting, if their parents taught them right from wrong. There are crooked journalists, too. There are dumb journalists. There are lazy journalists. There are also probing journalists and insightful journalists.

What does it take for McMahon's explanation for the indictment to be torn apart? In other words, he says he only did steroids when they were legal. Well, if that's the case, why didn't he go down to the corner pharmacy and get his steroids. Why were they Fed-Ex'd to him and others in the WWF living hundreds and thousands of miles from Dr. Zahorian's place in Pennsylvania. If they were legal, why did he have to have them Fed-Ex'd from Zahorian's place in Pennsylvania to Stamford, Connecticut if he used them legally. If they were legal, why is Dr. George Zahorian doing three-and-a-half years in a penitentiary? For dispensing legal drugs? What does it take to look through that?

I will tell you unequivocally and on the record that far and away the best journalistic efforts to get to the bottom of the story have been provided by wrestling newsletters such as yours and Meltzer's and the so-called tabloid shows, the *Geraldo's* and *Inside Editions*. Because I remember the CBS Evening News' efforts at this thing and they bought into his line of garbage. And they basically, with a forced bemusement, reported on it as if, "Let's touch on it, then let it go away. We'll do our quick responsibility thing and go away." They reported McMahon had no outstanding lawsuits against him. Nonsense.

The WWF, until this indictment, has always benefited from the fact that it's so cartoonesque that it can't really be happening, and therefore it's not really happening, it's not really leaving its mark anywhere. But who are our most vulnerable citizens? It's our children. Those are the people they target. Anyone who would do anything to hurt a kid for the name of profit or celebrate or create a negative image for a kid to admire in the name of profit, I respectfully suggest go straight to hell.

Keller: How did the coverage of this story compare to how you and others covered similar stories outside of pro wrestling?

Mushnick: I don't know if there's any way to characterize a newspaper's effort as it relates to going after a story. I think it relates to the people involved and their sense of right from wrong, their sensibilities, and their sensitivities. I don't know how *Sports Illustrated* could have done a big puff piece on the WWF knowing prima facie what it sells kids. They don't sell them the classic ideal of sports. Kicking a guy in the groin, hitting a guy with a chair, that's sport? Teaching them hatred. Having kids chant "faggot" at the Beverly Brothers. Come on.

Keller: Is there any other subject on which you've written where you have become as disgusted? Are these not-so-flattering revelations about pro wrestling restricted to the wrestling business, or is it reflective of a problem much larger?

Mushnick: Yeah, I've written a bunch of things. What the sneaker industry did in this country while it closed up all its factories here and sent them first to South Korea, where they were paying peanuts, then closed those factories and sent them to Indonesia where they were paying 12 cents an hour, literally, to make sneakers that probably cost in labor, materials, and shipping five dollars a pair selling them to kids for 180 bucks using these kids' heroes to sell them as status symbols knowing that kids were committing crimes for this garbage and then

stepping on the gas harder. Oh yeah, when I first wrote that, it was "What are you talking about?!" Then, slowly, people started to see that if it's targeted at kids it's an illogical sell. You don't ask a kid to do anything illogical. With an adult, there's that tacit understanding that they know right from wrong, so buyer beware. But a kid, they're our most vulnerable citizen. You never do anything to hurt a kid. Make a zillion dollars, but don't do it at the expense of a kid.

Even right now, the NBA and Converse and all of these companies have brought rim hanging in. Guys dunked for 40 years and never hung on a rim. They're doing it as a stylistic thing to show off. They say it keeps them from getting undercut; that's non-sense. They're selling rim-hanging. I just wrote a column on an organization in New York that has surveyed one-hundred parks in New York City where the backboards exist without rims on them. They're no longer basketball courts. This is a recent phenomena. All done from the emulation of our NBA stars. Look what Shaquille O'Neil's rap song says. "I slam it, I jam it, I make sure it's broke." Why do you want to tell a kid to go break the rim? It's insane.

I've gotten on the videogames. At the risk of sounding self-absorbed, I changed the NHL player's association Nintendo's and Sega games with all of this incredible mindless violence where the guys would punch each other silly, the guy would fall on the ice, and blood would spill from his head. The NHL players' association went on strike to get a cut of this marketing phenomena.

Look at Mario Lemieux. This guy was complaining when he was slashed and had his wrist broken in the playoffs two years ago. The violence must stop, he said. The Penguins went crazy, Lemieux went crazy. Have you ever seen Mario Lemieux's hockey game? You don't even have to play hockey. You can tap right into a fighting mode. And this guy was making money off of this. The NHL P.A. new hockey game doesn't have as much violence in it. The John Madden football game, the latest edition, based on a promise he made to me, doesn't have an element where you sack the quarterback and an ambulance comes onto the field and you put him in an ambulance. They don't have clothesline tackles anymore, yet these were all selling elements that appeared right on the box. I'll give McMahon credit for this. He was into profiting off of selling violence long before most.

Keller: How responsible do you feel you are for the government's investigation into Titan Sports?

Mushnick: I have no idea. I'd be disingenuous if I told you I had none.

Keller: Do you think the government has acted appropriately in terms of the charges in the indictment or based on what you believe to be the case, should they have acted differently?

Mushnick: I don't know how they operated. I

don't even know if they're done. My gut feeling is that they're not done, that there will be more (indictments) coming, targeted toward whom and for what reasons, I can only guess.

All I can tell you about the government is that it seemed to take seriously charges that other people, i.e. media outlets, seemed quick to laugh at or dismiss. They looked past this thing as a cartoon world.

Keller: Why hasn't the media done a better job covering this story?

Mushnick: It's hard to tell a guy who doesn't have investigative sensibilities to go to an investigative piece because he's going to come back with the same drivel he wrote about the team (laughs). That's what happened with you and the *Connecticut Post*. This guy didn't want to hear this stuff from you. It was more like work. Don't forget, maybe this guy got a message. "Ooh, the last guy who wrote something nasty about them, he's in court." Remember, when you're getting paid, say, a thousand dollars a week to be a reporter and you work three hours a day and you don't perceive yourself in jeopardy of losing your job, you file it, you put a period on it, and you go to sleep. You go have lunch, or dinner. It's a lot easier to write the drivel because you don't have to give up your heart and soul to it. But that's what makes a lousy journalist.

Keller: Do you have any sense of the motivations that cause people to do what you find so worthy of criticism?

Mushnick: I'm a father. I have two nephews whose rooms for a while were covered with the WWF stuff. I feel that television serves as a babysitter and parents have no idea what the hell these kids are watching or what kind of effect it has on them. If I know my kid or any kid idolizes a guy for having great muscles and those muscles are steroid enhanced, I want to get that word out. There was a time when I first got my byline that I wrote it straight, "Here's a guy, here's what he said, now end it." But then I grew up.

Keller: Why don't people running the wrestling business grow up?

Mushnick: I think the people in the wrestling industry benefited systematically with the knowledge that they wouldn't be covered with any critical overview and the Wade Kellers and Dave Meltzers who would provide that kind of overview reach such a small audience that it wouldn't have any impact and those who reach the largest audiences are writing nonsense. Look at the *New York Daily News*, the largest daily paper I think in the country, look at what they've done with this story. Instead, they provide you with The Slammer, a guy who doesn't have the decency to put his name on the column while he's doing what I regard as the devil's work, because he's a shill for Vince McMahon. He doesn't want to know the truth. If he knew it, he still wouldn't write it.

CHARLIE NORRIS

Charlie Norris is a young wrestler striving to make it big in pro wrestling. After five years in wrestling, tryouts with both the WWF and WCW, and one serious injury, Norris wants to change his wrestling career from part-time to full-time. In the following interview conducted May 1, 1993 by Wade Keller, Norris talks about his young wrestling career and his aspirations for the future.

Keller: How did you originally get involved in pro wrestling?

Norris: I got introduced to Eddie Sharkey by a friend of mine and he asked me if I was interested in becoming a professional wrestler and I said yes. And I went to wrestling camp and two months later had my first match, Dec. 3, 1988. It was against Bulldog Derringer.

Keller: What were you doing before becoming a pro wrestler?

Norris: I was always working with kids, working as a youth counselor with the City Inc. group in Minneapolis.

Keller: Were you a fan of wrestling while growing up?

Norris: I sure was. I always knew I was going to be a wrestler. I always liked the AWA wrestling. I liked Wahoo McDaniel and the Crusher, just like anybody else in Minnesota. I grew up with the AWA.

Keller: What was it about wrestling that made you a fan and interested in becoming a wrestler?

Norris: I always felt I would do well because I had the athletic ability. It was just the mystique of it. I liked the violence of it and the overall picture of wrestling. I also liked to talk to kids. I like being a role model for kids.

Keller: What's been the toughest part about being new in wrestling?

Norris: Not having enough matches. Training with Brad Rheingans has been really hard. The training part of it is really hard. You have to go up to Brad's camp. It's not that easy. I wish the average fan would know how hard it is. They go, "I can do that. I can do that." They don't know how hard it is being suplexed four times in a row by Brad Rheingans.

Keller: What are the keys to getting the attention of the major league promoters?

Norris: Being an Indian at 6-foot-6 and right now weighing 298 pounds, I don't have that much competition. Many organizations in Japan have called me, but I've had this agreement with Ole: Listen to other people, but don't sign with

anyone else. My first priority is going to WCW and getting the experience. Then going to Japan. I think in Japan is where I'm going to make some money. I'm big and in time I think I could learn to work the style. I like the tough style.

Keller: What are some of the things you've tried but didn't work?

Norris: When I tried out for New York (the WWF) about a year-and-a-half ago before they took the other guy, Tatanka, I was listening to so many people at that time. (Jay) Strongbow told me one thing, (Black Jack) Lanza told me another thing, (Vince) McMahon told me one thing, Pat Patterson told me one thing. I was really confused and I really wasn't ready to go back then. So right now, I try to listen to myself. I've got to say what I do in the ring. I'll listen to others, but I know it's what I do in the ring that counts.

Keller: Do you have any regrets thus far in your short career?

Norris: I really don't regret anything, but I wish I had more time to put into training at the gym and in the ring. With my full-time job (at City Inc.) it's really tough to do that. I guess my body is why I wasn't hired in New York, from what I've been told, but me and Strongbow didn't hit it off from the get-go. He wanted me to do stuff that I thought was really offensive to my culture.

I told him, "With all due respect, you're not a real Indian yourself. It's really offensive for me to do that." Next thing I know, they took the other guy. He's getting good. I really respect him for being successful, but I think he is a disgrace to all Indian people. I really hate what he's doing and what he's all about, but I also know it's not his fault. He's just doing what the WWF has told him to do. But by doing so, he lost my respect.

Keller: What in pro wrestling, either today or yesterday, offends either you or your culture?

Norris: Strongbow wanted me to act like, I don't know what you'd call it, a John Wayne Indian I suppose. I really didn't like it at all. He wanted me to run around like a crazy man. The dancing part is good, because I can do that. I don't do that in Minnesota and I hope everybody can see me do that soon. I guess I'm really shy in front of my family. But I am a really good dancer. I told (Strongbow) that I couldn't (compromise my culture) because I've got to go back home to my Reservation, to my family, and what are they going to think of me if I'm making fun of them.

Keller: Tell me about the Chippewa culture.

Norris: We are very proud. We are all one big family. My cousins are like my brothers. My aunts are like my mother. My uncles are like my father. We listen to our elders a lot. My grandfather and my grandmother, they passed away now, but I learned a lot of wisdom and knowledge. The number one thing they teach you is patience. That's come in handy lately in this business.

Keller: Tell me about your current situation with WCW?

Norris: I think things look really good down there. Tatanka getting over so well in New York has really helped my situation, I think. I talked to Dusty (Rhodes) and Ole. I've known Dusty about eight months now and we've talked a lot on the phone. I think he really likes me and I think they are going to use me really well down there. I talked to Bischoff. We're going to do a TV video. It's going to be a couple months before all of this materializes, but I'm really happy with WCW right now. I'm not a for sure, but I think I'm in.

Keller: Talk about your experiences at the WWF TV tapings?

Norris: The first time, Adnon El Kaissey told Vince about me and he said they would be interested in doing something with me. I worked with Brooklyn Brawler who was very upset that he had to put me over. He went out of his way to make me look bad. I still thought I looked pretty good, but I really wasn't ready. I didn't know back then about guys trying to eat you up. I wish I could work with him today, it would be a whole different ballgame.

Keller: How did you feel working in front of a major league atmosphere like the WWF tapings with cameras and bright lights and a large crowd and wrestlers around you who you grew up watching?

Norris: I was really scared. I've never worked in front of that many people, there were 5,000 people there in Macon, Ga. I was scared, I have to admit. Really scared. I took my contacts out before the match so the people were a blur. I get nervous before every match I have. I think I always will.

Keller: What has been the best moment in wrestling for you so far?

Norris: Probably last week wrestling for WCW against Rip Rogers and getting a good pop from the people. All the boys telling me I did good, like Arn Anderson, and congratulating me.

Keller: Is there any one wrestler you want to emulate or do you want to take something from a lot of different wrestlers' styles?

Norris: Last weekend I was on the plane with Barry Darsow (most recently Repo Man in the WWF) and we talked a long time. He said he watches everybody and mixes all of that in with his own style. I worked with Barry last week. He's a hell of a guy and a hell of a worker and a hell of a nice guy. But if I wanted to emulate anyone the most, it would be Terry Gordy.

Keller: Who is the best person you've dealt with in wrestling?

Norris: Eddie Sharkey. He's one of the boys. I really like him. He's the best friend I've ever had. Hawk and Lightning Kid (Sean Waltman) have also been great. I am Sean's biggest mark. I tell him that all the time. He is a star, a stud, just a great wrestler.

PAUL ORNDORFF

Paul Orndorff is remembered for his cocky "Mr. Wonderful" persona. Paul Orndorff is remembered for his record-breaking feud with Hulk Hogan. What some forget is that Paul Orndorff was one of the key players in Vince McMahon Junior's initial national expansion. Orndorff, Roddy Piper, and Hulk Hogan are looked upon as three of the key players that helped McMahon in his early days. Mr. Wonderful soaked up the sun's rays while he spoke about his career to Torch's editor, Wade Keller, on his portable phone in May 1991.

Wade Keller: How did you originally get involved in pro wrestling?

Paul Orndorff: I started in Florida. I guess I've been doing it 14 years now. I first got into wrestling thanks to Eddie Graham who was the promoter down there at the time. I had just got done playing football. I played at the University of Tampa and didn't do anything there for a while. I flipped on the TV one time and saw the wrestling on there. My father-in-law who knew someone at the bank who knew Eddie Graham talked to him. I had a meeting with him and got a try-out. It was a lot harder when I started to break

into wrestling because they wanted more or less, at least in Tampa, the athletes. Steve Keirn, Brian Blair, Hulk Hogan, Rick Steamboat, Bob Orton, Dick Slater, all those guys started down there. Those are some of the best there are, if not the best.

Keller: Did they insist on amateur background in wrestling or was background in any sport sufficient?

Orndorff: Wrestling. Eddie Graham and Hiro Matsuda, who was actually the guy who trained me, he trained everyone there. He's the best and insisted on amateur background.

Keller: From what you've heard, how does Hiro Matsuda's training compare in intensity and quality to others?

Orndorff: There's no comparison. You can be a musclehead, be six-foot-three and three hundred pounds and they'll make you a wrestler, but after the music stops and they take the robe off, then pretty well the match is over and done with. They really don't know the trade very well. I'm not cutting them down, I'm just telling you the way things have changed since we broke in ten or fifteen years ago.

Keller: Were you a follower of pro wrestling as you grew up?

Orndorff: No. I was a football player. I never really watched it. Every time I flipped the TV on, I would watch a little bit of it. I used to watch Steve Keirn and Bob Orton and Dick Slater and Don Muraco who were in Florida at the time. They had some really good matches. And Jack and Jerry Brisco had some matches that were just classics.

Keller: You're most famous for your days in Georgia and the WWF, and you started in Florida. Were there areas between Florida and Georgia where you gained valuable experience?

Orndorff: Yeah. I gained my most experience probably in Louisiana and Oklahoma for Bill Watts. Bill taught me a lot. A lot of good things happened there.

Keller: Are you somewhat disappointed that he is no longer involved in the sport? Do you think he would be a good promoter to get back into wrestling?

Orndorff: I think Bill Watts probably has the best TV mind of all of them. I still say that. When you looked at his TV shows compared to all the others around the country, his was a step ahead of everybody else's.

Keller: What was it that made his TV stand out above everyone else's?

Orndorff: Bill Watts was taught by Eddie Graham. At the time, he worked for Verne Gagne. And those people really had minds for this business. He was kind of tutored underneath them for the upper end of the business, the

promoting end of it. He was just one of a kind. He was taught from the best. He got it from Eddie. And Bill's a smart man. Bill's no dummy. He knew how to manipulate people and get what he wanted.

Keller: When you were in Georgia when it was on the SuperStation and there were thoughts of expanding, did you and other wrestlers sense that big changes were coming?

Orndorff: Amongst the boys, we figured it was going to get big because of the cable and because they could take it all over the country. Nobody had the guts to do it. Bill Watts was the first guy to run the big shows, the shows at the SuperDome. He was really ahead of everyone, too. I was on all those SuperDome shows. He was the first to run the big shows, Wrestlemania-type shows regionally, and drew like 33,000 or so. When the cable came in, it opened a lot of doors. But you've got to have local TV. That's what WCW is experiencing right now. They don't have a lot of local TV. They're just running off of cable and cable's not enough. You've got to have local TV. And that's what Vince has, he's got cable and local TV.

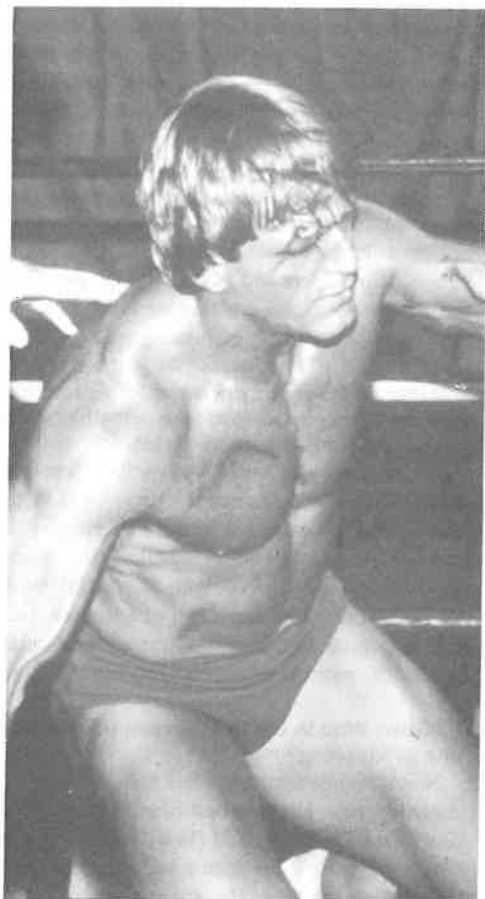
Keller: Do you think that is what got Vince ahead of everyone else and basically made him the first successful national promotion, because he had the foresight to see the importance of syndication?

Orndorff: And Vince was the new type. He took a gamble. Gamble might be the wrong word. He knew what he needed to do.

Keller: When you left Georgia and the SuperStation to go to Vince McMahon during his national expansion, did you go for money, opportunity, or did you think he was on to something really big?

Orndorff: I thought he was on to something big. I was in Georgia and made pretty good money here, but I had a chance to go out to New York, and Mr. McMahon, the father, he was the fellow that I actually talked to and he contacted me. How it all came about was that I just had worked a Japan trip and was asked if I would work a couple of California towns on the way back. So I did and about two or three days later I got another phone call from Mr. McMahon who wanted me to come in. They wanted me to sign a contract for them in New York. They wanted blood. Quite frankly, I wouldn't sign it. So I left and Mr. McMahon guaranteed me that I would stay working in Japan until this thing was put together. So myself, Piper, and Hulk were basically the guys that pioneered the whole thing. I'm not taking credit for the whole thing. I'm just saying we were the beginning of it.

Keller: Do you think you, Piper, and Hogan were the main three players in the WWF's early national success or were there other key names that were just as important?



Paul Orndorff

Photo by Mike Lano

Orndorff: Yeah, I think we were. Absolutely.

Keller: Do you think McMahon would have made it without you three? Had you, Piper, and Hogan not jumped, where would he be today?

Orndorff: New York, at the time, were a bunch of big guys. There were a couple guys that had decent bodies, and they didn't tend to do too many highspot wrestling moves and spots like that. They were more or less into a headlock and that kind of thing. That's where it should be now. It's gone too far to the "left," now. That's when that place was red-hot when things were further "right." I was the same kind of a wrestler, but I did more wrestling because of my background and being an athlete. Vince got a little bit of Paul Orndorff, a little bit of Roddy Piper, and little bit of Hulk Hogan, and a little bit of everybody, put it all together, and that's how he did it. There were a lot of guys that played a big part in it besides us three. You could say there were a half dozen that were up there and played a big part in it.

Keller: Was there ever a sense of panic that things were in trouble, say at Wrestlemania II?

Orndorff: I don't think so. No. Naturally we wanted every show to come off well. I think they're panicking more now than then.

Keller: What do you think about what Vince McMahon has done for the business? You mentioned national expansion was inevitable because of cable television. What Vince has done, has it been good for the business?

Orndorff: No. No I don't.

Keller: What has he done wrong?

Orndorff: First of all, a lot has to do with talent. I think they need to go back to basics. That's what's on the marquee up there - wrestling. That's what it's all about. It's not a bunch of monkeys and dogs and cats and birds and everything. I just think enough is enough. People now-a-days are losing interest in it. It is just too much.

Keller: Do you think WCW is guilty of the same thing?

Orndorff: I think they wrestle more. Although they do some goofy things, too. I've always been pretty much a straight guy, a logical guy, so I can take shots at both of them and trip them down. I tried to let my work do my talking instead of my music and my dogs and my robes and all that do the talking. I let my wrestling ability shine and it paid off. And I gained respect that way. I earned it with the fans. The fans expect their money's worth. People still like wrestling.

Keller: Do you think the promoters recognize that today, like Jim Herd, or do you think he sees Vince McMahon's success and tries to emulate that?

Orndorff: Jim Herd doesn't know a damn thing about wrestling in my opinion. I think he's a jerk. I mean, Jim Herd is a pizzaman and that's what he should be doing, selling pizza. It's very

I got another phone call from Mr. McMahon who wanted me to come in. They wanted me to sign a contract for them in New York. They wanted blood. Quite frankly, I wouldn't sign it. So I left and Mr. McMahon guaranteed me that I would stay working in Japan until this thing was put together. So myself, Piper, and Hulk were basically the guys that pioneered the whole thing. I'm not taking credit for the whole thing. I'm just saying we were the beginning of it.

obvious to me that he knows nothing about wrestling - nothing. There's no reason WCW shouldn't be doing what the WWF is doing in business and attendance. They've got some talent, some great talent there, the Steiners, ah...

Keller: Flair, Sting, Luger?

Orndorff: Well, Flair's been around 20 years. Enough is enough. You've seen one you've seen them all. Luger and Sting and Pillman, you've got some good talents. Arn Anderson and Barry (Windham).

Keller: And Ron Simmons, who is also from Florida?

Orndorff: Yeah. It's really funny, when I was a heel, I've watched Ron Simmons a few times and he is as vicious. I really tried to be vicious out there. I look at him and see a lot of Ron Simmons that was like myself. He just goes at you. He's a bull. He's big, he's strong, he's fast, and he gets better in the ring each time I see him.

Keller: If there is one change that has occurred since you got into wrestling that you could take back, what would that be?

Orndorff: There's a couple things. I would definitely say there's too much TV. Also, it's too easy for guys to get into wrestling. They don't have to pay their dues now. Go back to basics. I think we're saturated with TV. It's just like football. If they're going to saturate us with year-round football, watch, you're going to see a decline in football. Mark my words, you'll see it. You've got to look forward to something. The

same thing applies to wrestling. You can turn TV on here in Atlanta and for eight to twelve hours a day on a Saturday or Sunday and watch wrestling all day long. It's too much.

Keller: How about the promoter's catch-22 situation where there's money to be made by selling commercial spots on TV, but it's going to take a building period if you have a little bit of TV and try to draw on the road? So, do you think it's going to take a promoter with a longer term goal and wrestling intelligence to reestablish that you give them a little and they'll pay to see a lot? Or will promoters continue to take the easier way out and saturate TV and make revenue that way?

Orndorff: That's a pretty good way you put it, the easy way out. All they think about is one day instead of thinking about a year down the road. Vince, though, does think a year down the road. It's a business for him and he treats it like a business.

Keller: How do you think Bill Watts would do in Jim Herd's position or Dusty Rhodes's position?

Orndorff: I think he'd be the best they could find. I don't know anybody who could be better than Watts..

Keller: What were your experiences with Jim Herd? You worked mainly for him and Ole Anderson. What were the positives and negatives?

Orndorff: There was nothing positive. It was all negative.

Keller: Did you leave because of Herd and Anderson?

Orndorff: No. I left because hunting season started and I wanted to go hunting. They got a lot of their guys under contracts and it's hard for anybody else. Some of these guys they've got under contract, if they have to go out and work and really learn how to draw houses and put people in the seats, there are quite a few up there who are making really good money who would be making poor money.

Keller: Do you believe they aren't trying hard because they're under contract?

Orndorff: No. I think they're trying hard to keep their contract to be quite honest. There's some guys - I'm not going to say their names - who are under contract that shouldn't be. Hey, more power to them. I'm glad for them, but they need to learn their trade because if they had to go out and actually draw a house, they wouldn't draw flies.

Keller: Would you ever be interested in getting into management?

Orndorff: (Pause) There's a lot of things I don't know about, believe me. But I believe I've got a pretty good eye on talent. I think I've got a pretty good eye on whether a guy can draw

money or has potential. I do believe that. Would I be a booker? I've never done it. I don't know if I could do that. I can't say that I could, but I'm not saying I couldn't. I'm pretty basic, so maybe that's not what they want.

Keller: In your personal experience with WCW and before that, the WWF, how did each organization differ in the way they ran their organization?

Orndorff: I think it starts at the top. Vince McMahon is first class and he has first class people working for him. Vince knows the business. Whereas these other people do not know the business. They just haven't been around the business their whole lives. You need a good booker. Even when Ole was there, all he did was rehash things he had done before fifteen years ago. When people see the same old thing, they aren't going to come buy a ticket for it. They just ain't. It's that simple. That's why they fired him, I guess. I don't see why they hired him in the first place.

Keller: Who would you have liked to see them hire? Bill Watts?

Orndorff: Bill Watts would have been the man. If I know Bill the way I know Bill, I think he would want full reign of the place, he wouldn't want Pizzaman to tell him what to do. What Herd needs to do is make pizzas and sell them at the wrestling matches.

Keller: I believe your run with Hulk Hogan atop the WWF still ranks as the top or one of the top money-drawing feuds in the WWF history. Is there a personal pride in that?

Orndorff: Yeah, when you look back - it's not bragging or anything else - when he and I hooked up, we drew sellout crowds almost everywhere. If there were bigger buildings, we would have drawn more in some places. You know why? People believed Mr. Wonderful was going to beat Hulk Hogan for the belt. People truly believed. I was an ass-kicker. They believed that when I got in that ring, there was going to be an ass-kicking. I could take it, but I could give it out double what I took. People came out to see a contest. They truly believed somebody could beat Hulk Hogan.

Keller: What do you think about Sid Vicious?

Orndorff: Sid's a big kid. He's big, he's strong, I think he's got a lot of talent. He hasn't seen the best of what he will do yet. I think he'll do very good.

Keller: Do you think he has the desire to learn to be more than what he was in WCW by gaining more in-ring talent?

Orndorff: I hope he would. It would be a shame for somebody to not want to get better. I've seen so many guys where you see them, they've been in the business five, four, three years and you see them two, three years later and they haven't got any better. Guys need to learn their trade, go out in the ring, watch matches, ask questions to older

guys who have been in the business. Go out there and try to learn and try to be the best you can be and earn your money. The better you learn your trade, the better you're going to be in the long run. It's gotten longer because every time you turn around - you've got people doing everything now, you've got two people basically doing "Mr. Wonderful," "Mr. Perfect" - I just don't know what they're going to do next. That's what I'm kind of curious about.

Keller: Do you kind of see Mr. Perfect as the second coming of Mr. Wonderful?

Orndorff: No. I think Mr. Perfect is truly one of the best talents in the business. I think he's great. He's from a wrestling family. He's really good. Probably the best. He and Tito Santana are two of the better wrestlers in the WWF.

Keller: What led to your departure from the WWF?

Orndorff: I was hurt. I just got hurt really bad. I got nerve damage on my right-hand side. That pretty well did me in.

Keller: How's the shoulder now?

Orndorff: It don't hurt me. I just can't train as heavy and use the weights. When you have nerve damage like I had, it's a permanent thing pretty much. I still look all right, I think, but nothing like I used to look. But that's what did it. That was the end.

Keller: How much longer do you think you would have wrestled for the WWF? Would you still be there had you not suffered nerve damage?

Orndorff: Oh, I don't know if I'd be there or not, to be quite frank with you. I was put through the mill there for about four, four and a half years. It took a toll on me. It took a toll on ya', especially the way we did it back in the beginning. I was in L.A., then Miami, and the next day in Quebec. This was before they had a good system with routing. Now they've got it down pretty well as far as scheduling the towns. Back down it was just throwing a dart and wherever it hit, that's where it was from one day to the next. The travelling was much harder. You would be on the road four to six weeks at a time with no days off sometimes. It really burned me out. I think being burned out didn't help the fact that I got hurt. And I could see that on other wrestler's faces and I could tell in the way they worked, too. If you travel that much, you wear and tear the body to where it can only take so much. If you look around, you can see that lately a lot of the bigger names get hurt a lot. Plus doing all of these high-flying, highly dangerous moves, you're bound to get injuries.

Keller: What are you up to now?

Orndorff: I own a bowling alley and it does better each year. We're doing better every year.

Keller: That's doing well enough for you so

you're not like a lot of wrestlers who are desperate to stay involved in wrestling their whole lives? Do you feel lucky that you have something to fall back on?

Orndorff: Yeah. Sure, hopefully this will be my future. You never can tell. I just take it one day at a time. It could also change, too. If somebody offered me the right money, I might sell it. It's tough to make a dollar anymore.

Keller: What do you think you would have done had wrestling not come along?

Orndorff: I don't know what I would have done. I really have no idea. In one respect, I'm glad it came along. In another respect, I wish I had never gotten in it.

Keller: Why is that?

Orndorff: I've got two boys and I wasn't home for the first one too much, in the later years when a son needs a daddy. To be quite frank, if I had it to do all over again, knowing what I know right now, and the effect it can have on children, being away, I would have never done it. My wife didn't want me to do this, anyway. I figured it was a way for me to possibly make a living, and a good living. Of course, that didn't happen over night. It took me a lot of years before I could finally earn six figures, and finally I did.

Keller: A lot of young wrestlers will look at what you just said and it will make them think about their families. Did you feel pressure from family, or were they supportive of what you did, but still wished you were around?

Orndorff: My wife, I've been married to my wife for 23-plus years. She's a good godly woman. We've all been pretty close. We've had our ups and downs, as any marriage does. She was always supportive of me. I was the breadwinner and she was the wife and she did what she had to do and I did what I had to do. We are a pretty tight family. I'm happy with my family, very proud of my family. I love my family very much and love being with them. My later years going in the WWF, it really got to me. Work, work, work. Sure you make a lot of money, but money is not everything like a lot of people think. That's all they think, how much fun it was travelling and all that. Being away from my family and being away from my kids and my wife, the money really wasn't worth it, to be quite frank with you. My sons are 21 and 13.

Keller: What made you decide to get back into wrestling after you took the time off? Your shoulder recuperated enough?

Orndorff: Yeah. I didn't do anything for a couple of years. And I started training again. I can do a lot of things. I just don't weight 255 pounds anymore, I weight about 230 or 235. People were calling me and I still get paid pretty good independently. That's something I always wanted to do was to work independently and pretty much call what I want to do. I take my hat off to those independent guys because they really try. Some of them do well and some of them don't.

Keller: Do you think the independent scene is pretty strong today or do you think it was stronger in past years?

Orndorff: I really didn't know much about it in past years. I think there are some promoters today that are strong, that can draw two or three thousand people at matches sometimes.

Keller: What do you think about Herb Abrams and the UWF?

Orndorff: Herb is a go-getter. He really wants this thing to go. He's a good guy and I really enjoy working for Herb. I knew Herb before he got into this. I knew Herb way back in the WWF days. He's been a friend of mine. I really hope Herb can make it. He's got some really good talent. If he can get some syndication and good cable, he's got a good chance at it. He treats the guys well, he pays decent. Everybody likes to get in on something on the ground floor. That's why I'd like to see it go. If you just had one airline or just two airlines, you'd be in a lot of trouble. You know that. It's the same way with wrestling. You either go with McMahon or WCW or here and that's it. And that's a shame. You need these little territories where guys can learn their trade. Then when it's time to go out there with the big boys, then they know their trade. When they get done there, they can go back to the little territory and then a year or two later, they go back to the big league again. It's better for everybody. I just think if Herb can get TV, he's got a lot of things in the oven, a lot of things that could happen. He's learning.

Keller: What do you think are Herb Abrams's strong points and weak points as a promoter?

Orndorff: Herb's from California and he's done a lot of promoting. He hasn't promoted wrestling much. He knows TV fairly good. He knows what doors to knock on. If he can just get that right door, then boom, there's somebody out there that wants to get into the wrestling business. If there are people who are willing to invest in it, if they want to think long term five years, there could be a good return on their money. It's just a matter of putting it all together.

Keller: Do you think it would help Herb Abrams to surround himself with wrestling people, like a Bill Watts, or could he do it on his own?

Orndorff: No, you need experience. But there again, he's got to get TV. No, he's got to get somebody in there that really knows how to do the booking and that match-making and those things. If things work to our benefit, we may have something.

Keller: Are you with the UWF for the long haul or if the right offer came, would you still look at it?

Orndorff: I close no more doors and I never say never. It depends what the circumstance is. I've still got a few good years left in me. I know I can still be the best heel in the business right today. I've been a babyface, but I know with the right

situation, things could work. I know to myself that I could have gotten over as a heel more than Flair.

Keller: How many times have you been to Japan?

Orndorff: Five or six times.

Keller: What is your impression of Japan wrestling?

Orndorff: They're very business over there. I worked for Inoki and you better be in shape when you're over there. Their style really suited me. All action. They're in shape. It suited me fine. It was okay.

Keller: Did you find that there were things done in Japan that could be done here?

Orndorff: I don't think so, other than what is done in the ring. They get the cream of the crop of the Americans. The black trunks, black boots, it's really basic over there. They let their work do their talking for them.

Keller: There is a lot of talk about how steroids are going to lead to a big problem in the future of wrestling, and especially Superstar Graham has got the media juices flowing. What are your thoughts on that as far as the control of steroids? Do you think it's going to be a problem?

Orndorff: Absolutely. Absolutely. Absolutely it is. You can bank on it. I'm surprised it hasn't happened yet as far as the testing of it. They test for cocaine, but they overlook it. They've put the hammer down in football. And quite frankly, it's the best thing they could do before something really happens, they're going to have to go in there and do it. Somebody's got to get in there and start testing. Then you'll see a big difference.

Keller: I think it will probably end up helping the promoter who will test because the wrestlers won't be able to rely upon their bulids and they will improve in other areas. Do you believe there's the fright in that promoters believe no one will buy their product if it features smaller wrestlers?

Orndorff: That's probably what they think. They think bigger is better. Get bigger and bigger and bigger until, boom! somebody explodes. I know for a fact there's been some things going on where there's some real touch and go things up there and all over the country with it. Something will happen. I'm sure the Food and Drug Commission or whoever handles that thing, I'm sure that it will all be taken care of.

Keller: Do you think something like that could be the downfall of McMahon, if a lot of wrestlers testified against him for pushing steroids, blatantly or not so blatantly?

Orndorff: I'm sure that would change wrestling as we know it.

Keller: I appreciate your time greatly.

Orndorff: No problem, Wade. Anytime.

REFLECTIONS

Paul Orndorff: Paul Orndorff was part of one of the more successful house show runs of the last 20 years. His feud with Hulk Hogan, while not having a famous pay-per-view moment that stands out, was perhaps the last of the great house show feuds.

After his run against Hogan, he moved to being a mid-card wrestler, and then retired due to nerve damage in his shoulder that prevented proportional muscle development.

At the time of this Torch Talk, Orndorff was retired from wrestling running a bowling alley he purchased. Since the interview, he left the bowling alley business and returned to wrestling.

In a telling comment, he says in the interview he might like to get into management. While he's not creative like a booker, he sees himself as someone with a good eye for talent.

Despite having his best money days with the WWF, he is honest enough in the interview to say he doesn't think Vince McMahon's influence on the wrestling industry had been positive. Some ironic comments include him saying "enough is enough" about Flair's career, that there's too much wrestling on TV, and that promoters don't think a year down the road. Today Orndorff is part of WCW's management team and WCW headlines with Flair, has expanded TV exposure with Monday Nitro, and books Nitro week to week.

Brad Rheingans: Brad Rheingans was another of my early Torch Talks. In this interview, Rheingans talks about how it upset his life plans when Jimmy Carter elected to boycott the 1980 Olympics. He also explained as honestly as he could why his skill in amateur wrestling didn't translate to pro wrestling.

Despite his strong amateur background, he had good things to say about the success of Vince McMahon, who really took the amateur style out of pro wrestling, and Hulk Hogan, who is known for creating a non-athletic mainstream perception of what a pro wrestler is.

Most interesting was his comment that he wishes he had put his pro career in the hands of Vince McMahon and not Verne Gagne.

Rheingans currently helps train pro wrestlers in Minnesota.

Jim Ross: Jim Ross is the prototype politician when it comes to Torch Talks. His answers usually seem to be laced with concern for how the person he is talking about will take his comments. That diminished the value of Ross's Torch Talks. That said, he was as big a part of the early days of WCW in the late-'80s and early-'90s as anyone. Sometimes, reading between the lines and past his ingenious rationalizations for some of his superiors' more stupid moves, is a real inside glimpse at the politics and realities of day to day operations, especially a directionless number two promotion as WCW was during his stays there.

BRAD RHEINGANS

Brad Rheingans was favored to win the gold medal in the 1980 Olympics, but he was unable to complete due to the U.S. boycott. He turned pro in 1980 with the AWA and has since wrestled for the WWF, PWA, and overseas in Japan. After a stint as AWA World Tag Team Champions with Ken Patera, he has been training Russians to be pro wrestlers in Japan. In this "Torch Talk" conducted Mar. 8, 1990, Brad discusses his career and his thoughts on training Russians.

Wade Keller: It was an unfortunate set of circumstances that led to you turning pro in 1980. What happened?

Brad Rheingans: It was a very unfortunate thing that we had to boycott. It was actually my peak physically and mentally. It was my year to win a medal in the Olympics. In the World Championships, I had won a silver and a gold medal at the same competition. Unfortunately, Jimmy Carter felt there was a need for a boycott. I wasn't going to wait another four years. It was at that point that I decided to get on with my life. I chose pro wrestling to be the job that I wanted to do for the rest of my life.

Keller: What was your initial reaction to being a professional wrestler?

Rheingans: I had grown up with pro wrestling. My father was a big pro wrestling fan. I had watched it on television since I was 10 years old. I had always enjoyed the physicalness of the sport and the competitiveness and just being in front of crowds in stadiums. I always liked the feeling I got at national tournaments from the people.

The biggest thing was I felt I was behind financially with my peers at that point in my life because I dedicated my whole life to being an amateur wrestler and I wanted to be a Gold Medalist in the Olympics. You can't do that overnight. It takes several years. With our system at that time, it was a very tough thing to earn a living and also wrestle as an amateur.

Keller: Are you still bitter about the boycott?

Rheingans: I don't carry it around with me like I did at the time. It's still annoying. I don't know, the Olympics could have opened a lot of other doors. Those people who are in the major sports like swimming, gymnastics, and track, it might have meant a life full of endorsements and big money and they never had that chance. I can see why some of them would be very bitter about it.

Keller: How are your training Russian wrestlers to be professionals in Japan. How did that come about?

Rheingans: I guess what happened was New Japan Pro Wrestling, which was led by (Antonio) Inoki, wanted for public relations or competitiveness to bring together a trilateral

Superpowers between Russia, the United States, and Japan. They wanted people with really good amateur backgrounds and also a professional background. They thought this would be pretty spicy for the people of Japan. They are more educated over there to the combativeness and martial arts.

So they felt this concept would sell really well, and at the time, it did. It started out like a house on fire. I think it has been put on the back shelf for now. I think it has a lot to do with who is in power and who the promoters are and if they promoted right. I feel the promotion was lacking on that end of it. When they were trying to push it the way they should have pushed it, it's like a family owned business with people who have been in it for years whose egos get in the way. They don't do what's best for the program. They keep themselves in a position nobody else can top. It's really tough to get around it. Unfortunately, sometimes the program fails because of it.

Keller: Are there communication problems with three different nationalities involved?

Rheingans: A couple of the Russians speak fairly decent English. German is a pretty universal language when you're over in Europe. I can speak a little German to get by because I was over there for about four months wrestling in '87. So I can speak a little street language and can convey my thoughts to them. The Russians didn't even want to try to learn Japanese. I speak a little bit of Japanese to get by.

Keller: How do you compare the legitimate toughness of the Russians to yourself and Steve Williams?

Rheingans: First of all, I consider myself and Steve Williams in the same league with the Russians. There are so many different levels, Wade. There's high school level; there's college level; there's international Olympic level. Each time you make the jump, the competition gets a little tougher and tougher. If anybody has ever competed internationally they can pretty much give you the whole picture of the spectrum from high school all the way up.

Steve and I credential-wise had no trouble adapting to the competition with the Russians because we had very solid backgrounds in wrestling. Both nationally and collegiate. Our training has become even better, not for the amateurs, but for the pros, than the Russians. Basically when the Russians are done with their amateur careers they are taken care of. Their top athletes are considered in the upper class of people. Their training and competitiveness definitely take a downslide. That's where I feel we have the edge on them a little bit.

Keller: What do you like most and least about being a pro wrestler?

Rheingans: The things I don't enjoy are the politics. Politics are one thing, and you can get into that for hours and hours. Politics make it not so much fun. But the wrestling itself, per se, I

enjoy very much. I enjoy coaching. I enjoy training people. It's been part of my life, being an Olympics coach, being a college coach, working with young kids. That's the one thing I enjoy the most.

Keller: Do you feel frustrated that because pro wrestling is built around big muscles, gimmickry, and radical interviews that a genuinely great wrestler like yourself is not as big a superstar as you probably deserve?

Rheingans: The thing about it is, you have to look at it in two different ways. You can look at it in the pure sense of wrestling or you can look at it in the sense of entertainment. It is free-enterprise. Every promoter has the right and freedom to try what works. That's where we have to separate our egos from what's really business. Sometimes we're not always going to jump right to the top. That's just the way it is. But everybody has a position, as long as they understand their position, they're going to be okay.

Keller: What are your thoughts on Vince McMahon?

Rheingans: I don't know Vince really well. There again, he's not really the guy who's had the tight on. His expertise is as a businessman and he's made it work. He's done well and he's used what's worked best for him and come out on top. I'm not going to cut anyone down just because they've gotten ahead of somebody else.

Keller: Hulk Hogan?

Rheingans: He's come up, he's paid his dues. He trained hard when he was younger. It wasn't like he just jumped in there and everything happened. He's put a lot of time in and he's done his time in several different territories and worked hard and tried to build himself up. He's learned the actual art and science of both wrestling and entertainment. It worked for him.

I always knew him personally when he was in the AWA and he was always one of the boys. He never turned his back on anybody. He was always honest with everybody and unfortunately that's why he left.

Keller: If you could go back in time, would you make any different career moves knowing what you know now?

Rheingans: Yes I would. I had a chance to start in New York when I first started in 1980 when I was out there actually training with Bob Backlund at the time. Actually it was Vince McMahon Jr. who was talking to me at the time and I got to know him a little bit. I got to know quite a few of the people out there. I was really comfortable and really wanted to stay out there. I know if I would have, I probably could have done better than starting in the AWA. You never know. Verne wanted me to work his wrestling camp. This is home. This is where I started. There are a lot of factors. His territory was really good. It was one of the best. He could have gone either way. Being here would be like being at home and that was the biggest reason I did what I did.

JIM ROSS

Jim Ross, the current anchor announcer for WCW, has many thoughts and opinions on the current state of the National Wrestling Alliance. In the following "Torch Talk" conducted July 10, 1990, Ross frankly discusses the NWA and his thoughts on its current condition.

Wade Keller: Now that Sting is the NWA World Champion, do you see him being a good replacement for Flair in the long run?

Jim Ross: I'm optimistic he's going to be a good one. I think the WWF, with Hogan, set a trend that the champion is a good role-model, and a hero to the masses, especially the younger people. Sting is young while Hogan is getting up there in his mid-30s. Hogan is still the man. There's Hogan and there's a whole bunch of wrestlers after that. There's some good ones, but there's a big gap between Hogan and the rest of the folks who are working in wrestling.

Sting has the potential, because of his look, his age, and his charisma. He enjoys being around people and he doesn't have a problem signing autographs and interacting with the kids. He has potential to be a great champion. Now, I mean great champion in the lines of marketing, in the lines of image, and in the lines of being able to cross over to other mediums.

Keller: What are three things you would do with Sting to make him more profitable and marketable?

Ross: I would not overexpose him on our television shows. He would be the priority for everybody that does P.R. for our company and publicity. Get him in print ads and let him move into other areas—commercial endorsements, print ads, TV commercials. I would do a campaign of Public Service Announcement to send to all the stations we're airing on. I would make a concerted effort to expand his name—identity. That's what politicians are always talking about. Races are coming up and you'll hear that term much more. That means Sally Jesse Raphael or Donahue or Entertainment Tonight. I would make sure he was invited by the Turner People to every big event that was around. A guy with a flat-top, a tuxedo, and paint on his face will get some coverage.

Keller: Do you think he needs some formal training in dealing with media, such as Michael Jordan received early in his career with the Bulls?

Ross: All of us could use some polish and all of us could use more refinement, but I think it will be less work for him to get it right. He's a very charismatic guy. He likes people and he likes to be around people. He's always laughing.

For example (Lex) Luger, who's a great athlete, is a little more introverted than Sting. So consequently it would be a little bit more of a challenge for Luger to be outwardly jovial or positive. Not because he doesn't want to, it's just not his make up. He's more of an introverted guy who can do it, but he's not as comfortable as Sting. Sting's more of a natural.

Keller: On appearances such as Family Feud and Sonya Live, many have thought Sting came off as cocky. Is that easily solved?

Ross: Oh yes, easily solved. The thing with Sonya Live, she got very personal and was trying to be cute and therefore offended the guys. They reacted that way. I think that's human nature. Who wouldn't do that? She was talking about their sex life and their personal lives. That wasn't why they were on that show.

Hogan's had a chance to work out all the bugs. He's had movies and cartoon shows, all that stuff they've afforded him. He wasn't always polished.

Keller: What do you think about the recent signings by Ole Anderson, such as Junkyard Dog, Iron Sheik, and Thunderbolt Patterson?

Ross: Everybody raised holy hell when Ole brought back these older guys. They're not here for long-term. They're here as a stop-gap measure. When we were preparing for Sting to wrestle Flair and Flair had to get into a short little program with somebody, JYD was the catalyst to refocus on Sting. People who understand the business can sit back and say, "Yeah, I know what you mean." The casual smart fan didn't really want to delve into it. Did they think he was to work a program with Flair? He was here as a pawn for a catalyst getting Flair refocused on Sting. He was a "Dud with an Attitude" and all this other crap. He has a way of doing that.

I'm not saying I condone the racial angle at all. But let's say JYD wasn't black. We're talking about a guy who has a little name ability that is a different guy for Flair to wrestle for a couple weeks. What are you gonna do, go back with Flair vs. Luger? Who did we have ready for Flair? We can go back and keep saying, "Well, that's the company's fault, they should have had somebody ready." Probably that's true, too. But we also should have had more heels ready than Flair.

The WWF's the same way. They're not drawing right now as much as they were and can you say the reason is, if you want to fine-tune it, that there wasn't a babyface ready when Hogan stepped down? They tried all they could with Ultimate Warrior, but he's just not clicking. That's not taking anything away from Ultimate Warrior. Like anything, man, there's been very few times when someone follows a legend and is successful. Mickey Mantle did it when he followed Joe DiMaggio. But Bobby Mercer didn't do it when Mantle left. I don't know if anyone could follow Hogan and be as effective in the eyes of the people.

I think sometimes we have to look at the whole situation. This is a really intricate and involved business with diverse personalities and you have to try to mesh with the current trends in society. That's why this racial angle—well, here Mandela is coming to America and we're doing this racial angle. Maybe ten years ago. It did work for Ole ten years ago. His whole thing with Thunderbolt was racial oriented. I think that's passé.

Keller: On that note, what are your thoughts thus far on Ole Anderson as booker?

Ross: Ole has got some excellent qualities. I think his work ethic is beyond reproach. The guys go out and bust their fannies and work hard and work tight. I think that's good. Probably the only negative I think about Ole is that the actual producing of television has changed so much since he was in the mainstream. And production values, you can't do it with one camera. Things like that are probably his only liability.

One is not on a vendetta to bring back every old crony he has ever known. Some of those guys are coming in here to help these other guys learn. Everybody says, "Oh, they're going to bury Pillman." I read some things in these newsletters that are absolutely hilarious. Cactus Jack saw that his time wasn't here now and he asked to leave. Unless he's fabricating a story, because I talked to him about it. I was involved in that deal.

But Ole is bringing some experienced guys in. A heel working with Paul Orndorff should learn. See what I mean? A Brian Pillman working with an experienced Horsemen-type guy or a guy like Dutch Mantel who can work and knows the basics, you're going to learn. Brian Pillman's not ready to headline cards. Brian Pillman will be a star barring injury because he's got great abilities and great aptitude for the business. He went from Calgary to national television. That's quite a leap. We have to bring in guys who have experience to help these guys. That's the deal.

We're certainly not going to build around these older guys. Sting's going to be the guy as the champion, number one face. Then you've got Luger. These guys are young. They're marketable. They're also using Orndorff and JYD. You've got to have people who can work a decent match. Orndorff can do that. JYD is, as I said earlier, a temporary fix. He was a bridge for Flair to leave Luger and move to feud with Sting. He needed a new segue and that's what he was. JYD was involved in some tag matches with those guys.

Keller: How would you compare Bill Watts to Ole Anderson?

Ross: Very similar. Having worked with Bill, he was kind of my guru. He's the guy who gave me my break. He's the one who taught me the story of telling a wrestling match. If you get into a long match on pay-per-view, like Steamboat vs. Flair, I think I can sell that match because I understand what those guys are trying to accomplish. I don't adjust their match to my

style, I adjust my style to their match. but Bill and Ole are very, very similar.

Keller: What do you think their main differences are?

Ross: Probably just the fact that Bill might be a little more artsy and a little bit more aware of producing episodic television where week one leads to week two and week two leads to week three. As far as their work ethic, and the philosophy of in-ring work and abilities and effort, as far as putting a premium on athletic content, they are similar.

Keller: What was your reaction to Ole Anderson getting the booking position?

Ross: I was very surprised. It was rumored at one time that Watts was the front-runner. He had had long conversations with Mr. Petrik and Mr. Herd. I think basically there was a personality thing there. Bill is used to running his own show on an island to himself. He didn't want to have to answer (to others). He was going to have a problem with his current attitude toward really fitting into the corporate structure with memos and channels and protocols and all that stuff. Ole may have the same problem. He hasn't yet, but he may because it's not easy to go through all the channels. You have to be patient and chip away. Major changes are done very slowly and sometimes that's very frustrating.

I was surprised when Ole got the job. I thought Watts had it locked up and I was excited. That was selfishly motivated because I had worked with him before. I had confidence in him and I thought he was what we needed. But when they hired Ole and I started getting acquainted with Ole, which I really hadn't taken the time to do, I found that he and Bill are very similar with some very important issues in our business. So I think if Ole is given the chance, Ole will do a very good job because he will put together a stable crew of wrestlers. He will put the young guys in an environment where they can learn and try to capture their abilities—make them the best they can be. Hopefully he will be able to allow some of us who are included in that regard to help him, and he has been included to let us work with the TV product, the presentation of what we do on television. Not who "goes over," or who works with who or what this program is, but how it goes over on television. I think he's been very inclined to do that. He's learning again in that regard.

Keller: Is Ole open to accept the changes that have occurred in the business or as many have speculated, is he trying to take wrestling back to the '70s?

Ross: I don't agree with that. I don't agree with their rationale. Those who say that see Thunderbolt come in—Thunderbolt is in to work the Omni, period. He's not going to wrestle; he's not going on the road. Thunderbolt is a black activist in Atlanta He's been in the public eye for years. The black community reacts to his messages. It's simply a local promotional effort.

Ole wants to have a solid, snug wrestling product in the ring. People that can work. There is an influx of some older talent, and that talent is here for a purpose, and not to be the foundation of our company. Just to establish that style, a direction. We've got Barry Horowitz lined up against Brian Pillman next month as the opener at house shows. That's a good match. There's nothing wrong with that. Horowitz is a heck of a talented kid. Brian Pillman is, too. Horowitz, quite frankly, is a better worker than Pillman. But Pillman has that intangible star quality. If Pillman works with Horowitz on a regular basis, Pillman's going to get better at what he does. Then you move him to another heel, maybe Dutch Mantel, who has a different style than Horowitz, but fundamentally is sound, so Brian learns more. That's why that kind of stuff is being done.

Now you say that analogy doesn't hold true with Junkyard Dog. Right. Junkyard has never been a "good worker." With Junkyard Dog, what we tried to do and I thought was much needed, was have a black babyface. Contrary to everyone's belief, you can't just reach out and grab one. They just don't have a Yellow Pages with "Black Babyface headline. You find one or develop one. The greatest black babyface I think we have in this business in the '90s is Ron Simmons. We have him, but he's not ready to be a babyface. He's learning, too. Now, isn't it ironic. Look who they're (Simmons & Butch Reed) working with almost every night, The Rock & Roll Express. Nobody can debate me that Rock & Roll Express are not a great tag team. They are great workers. They make everybody they work with better. They can have a seven or eight minute match with The State Patrol that is entertaining.

So if people would really stop and look at it, Ole's putting Rock & Roll against Doom, and one of the reasons is that it's going to make Ron Simmons, who is the future star of that foursome, a better hand. So that kind of rationale is there. I don't think that's going back to the '70s. Hey, if we can go back to the '70s as far as work ethic, giving the fans their money's worth, taking great pride what they do and not being pompous and overbearing and egotistical and having agents, then I'm all for that. I'm not all for black boots and black tights and sixty minute Broadways. Brisco and Funk were a different breed of cat, man. They could go sixty minutes. That's not going to happen again.

Keller: Who would you have chosen as booker given the choice?

Ross: That's a tough question. I tell ya', after talking to Ole, certainly they would not have been remiss to have made the selection they made. But knowing my background and knowing him so well, I quite frankly would have gone with Watts. I know what he can do. I know that he does great TV. We had the most profitable per capita territory in wrestling.

JIM ROSS

The following is a "Torch Talk" with Jim Ross conducted by Wade Keller on Saturday evening, Apr. 25, 1992 by phone. Ross discusses the new "WCW Saturday Night," Kip Frey's first few months with WCW, the job Dusty Rhodes has done as booker, Ross will delve into other areas, including the future of pay-per-view in wrestling, and the WWF scandals and their effect on WCW and wrestling in general.

Wade Keller: After four weeks, are you happy with the new WCW Saturday Night program?

Jim Ross: I'm pretty happy with the way it's progressed so far. It's got a lot of room for improvement. I think in the first few episodes it's shown some bright spots that we hope to build on in the future.

Keller: What would you cite as the bright spots and on the contrary, what needs to be improved?

Ross: I think if you can have a good, quality, two-out-of-three falls match, that's a positive. The opportunity to interview one of the wrestlers in an environment where they're not restricted by a one-minute time frame for basically a monologue. I think that's a positive type of interview.

Keller: I thought that came through today



Jim Ross

Photo by WK

with the Nikita Koloff interview, which I thought was strong, especially given the history that was referred to. It paid some respect to the fans who have been watching WCW for a couple years.

Ross: Sure. I'm glad it was good. So I think the two-out-of-three fall matches and the interviews are probably two of the bright spots. And you never know, the guest co-host situation can be a real good situation, too. It's going to be feast or famine. Some people are going to have the aptitude for it and some people aren't. We'll just hopefully lessen the opportunity for failure. We've got a lot of people wanting to be on it.

Keller: Who are some of those people?

Ross: A lot of names are coming up. A guy that works for MTV who does the Headbanger's Ball. Other people too that they're talking to right now.

Keller: Mainly people outside of the wrestling business?

Ross: That's our goal is to have people on there from outside the wrestling business. Sometimes you're going to get somebody who really follows what's going on and other times we're going to have people who aren't aware of the feuds and may not be as insightful.

Keller: How about other areas where there's room for improvement?

Ross: I think the one thing we can do is more out of ring features, at least one fresh one every week. I think that would be real positive for the show if we could do that.

Keller: I know he's your boss, but as frank as you feel you can be, so far what's your impression of the positive aspects Kip Frey has been able to bring to WCW since Jim Herd's departure in January?

Ross: Probably the main thing that he's brought is a positive attitude to all phases of our division. He's an easy guy to communicate with and he's very intelligent and he'll be the first to admit that he doesn't know a great deal about the wrestling business, but he's learning. He does have an excellent background in television production because of his degree in film from U.S.C. He's helped us a lot in production. I think the production guys are happier now than they've been. I think when people are happy and in a positive environment, they do their best work. I think our production guys are taking a lot more pride in their product. I think we've seen that in the graphics on the WorldWide show and the music they're adding. So the guys in production are really working hard and Kip has been a real shot in the arm, especially. But his attitude and the way he handles people are probably his best attributes.

Keller: Do you sense that not just people in the office but the wrestlers and personnel on the road have also sensed that change and gained optimism?

Ross: I think the wrestlers have found him to

be a very accommodating manager in that he's someone who will give them time to come in and communicate with them. From what I can see, and I'm not on the road that much, the guys seem to be real happy with Kip Frey.

Keller: What might be Kip Frey's weaknesses right now, possibly a long-term area where he will need to rely on someone else or he'll have to work really hard where someone else may not have to struggle?

Ross: The most obvious thing he has a deficiency in is the actual in-ring product of wrestling, why some things are done and why some things aren't done. Obviously that will be the area he'll need the most improvement in. At the same time, that will be the area he improves the most in. He's a very intelligent man. He watches a lot of tapes. He's very aware of what people say about our product. He's very critical when he watches it. In that regard, I think he's going to learn really quickly because he's watching a lot of products.

Keller: Looking at the next few months of WCW, what would you like to see the priority be for WCW to improve upon? Where should the most attention be dedicated?

Ross: I don't know. That's kind of hard to say. There are several areas that the company overall needs to concentrate on. One thing is obviously upgrading the syndicated network and trying to fill the voids in the markets we don't have TV in. That's a very crucial area that we have a productive year from Turner Program Services, that they get aggressive in pitching our product and clearing stations. There are a lot of real good markets we don't even have an hour of television in.

Keller: What are some of those prime markets that come to mind?

Ross: There's a lot of markets that need to be cleared and there's another set of markets that need to be upgraded. I can assure you, or I think anyway, that wrestling would do well in Tulsa and there's no WCW program in Tulsa right now. Oklahoma City's television needs to be upgraded. I think it's on at 9 o'clock. Obviously New York needs an upgraded timeslot. Right now we're airing on the only timeslot that's available to us. I know talks are going on and maybe there'll be something better in New York in the future. That's the key thing. We've got to get our syndicated network improved—not everywhere, we've got some good clearances and some good times. It's not in total shambles, it's just there's some key markets that need to be cleared. Then that allows you to book house shows and route intelligently and economically. It opens a lot of doors when you have a good, solid syndicated base.

Keller: You probably have some insight into this from your syndicated network experience in the UWF. When you say you need to upgrade your program or get into a market, what does it

take? Is it just Kip Frey calling somebody or what actually goes into that?

Ross: Turner Program Services calls stations on a regular basis because they offer a great deal of product in syndication. National Geographic Specials and many movie packages from our library, of course wrestling, Captain Planet. We're the highest rated syndicated program that they clear. And they have increased their incentives to reprioritize wrestling. So I think Kip has done a tremendous job along with Rob Garner (WCW Vice President in Charge of Television and Sales) in working with Turner Program Services and I think Turner Program Services has a lot more confidence in what we're doing. They see new graphics on World Wide. They see the commitment to Jesse Ventura. They see a good May sweep planning. They know that the World Wide show is the number one priority in our company as far as television is concerned. I think they like that commitment and I think they like dealing with Kip and Rob. They are in the process of working more closely and more diligently with our product and I think we'll see some positive results by the end of the year.

Keller: What do you think the impact of the signing of Ventura had on WCW as a whole?

Ross: It's been a very positive impact. We got a story in USA Today about his signing and his debut. He's very much in demand from radio stations and other forms of media for interviews. He brings a lot of credibility. His extensive exposure on NBC's Saturday Night's Main Events has been invaluable for him along with his Schwarzenegger movies. He's got great name recognition, he's very talented. It was a very loud shot fired that WCW is trying to make a commitment to make our product better and this is one step we're going to take to prove that to the fans, and that is by hiring the best man available and I don't think there's too much argument that he's the best color man in this business.

Keller: Looking at all the aspects that have gone on over the last few months with Kip Frey, do you think today more than any other day since the UWF acquisition took place, WCW is in a position to "turn things around" or become the group or one of the two groups as opposed to the CBA of wrestling as maybe the perception has been?

Ross: Absolutely. Without a doubt. We are in the best position to get our house in order and deliver a more consistent and improved product on a nightly basis than we've ever been in. We've got a lot of real good people involved in our company and a lot of people have stepped in and become a lot more cooperative company-wide. A lot of those guys knew Kip and those that didn't found he was a very pleasant guy to deal with. So we're getting a lot more support company-wide for wrestling than we've got in a long time. So the feeling is we've got a long, long way to go and we still have a lot of areas to correct, but we're taking a lot of positive steps in a lot of areas and right

If the ideal situation could be created, we would have the territories back and be developing talent and be moving talent from territory to territory. It would be so much better and easier to manage and the TV would be so much easier to do. Unfortunately that'll never happen.

now we're doing some good things. It's not going to happen overnight—I know a lot of people have heard that before. I've been here since the beginning of this situation and I came from a very productive wrestling territory where I was used to seeing a lot of people in the buildings and things of that nature, so I'm anxious to see it happen, too, and I think we've got a good shot at it.

Keller: Looking at nearly 18 months ago when Dusty Rhodes came from the WWF and returned to the booking position in WCW, you were one of the people who spoke optimistically about him, that he had "changed" and learned from Titan, and has a good plan. Since then, has Dusty lived up to your expectations as the guy to carry the promotion? Part two is if Dusty Rhodes didn't fulfill your personal expectations and his, do you think Kip Frey will provide Dusty with an environment where that will now be possible?

Ross: First of all, I think Dusty has done a lot of positive things. Dusty's done some real unique things, some concepts. I think Battle Bowl at Starrcade is a neat one. He created the War Games. That's my favorite, personally. I like the intensity and the times and advantages and disadvantages. It has a lot of unique points to it that help make a wrestling match what it is with a lot of drama. He's done a lot of positive things, but he's in a real thankless job. I mean, the role of a booker in any company is the one focus, it's the heartbeat of the company. The booker's creativity and his ideas are the catalyst for what we put on TV and in the arenas. So the booking position is ultimately important, but it's also a thankless position because, it's kind of like somebody writing a screenplay and some of us are going to like it and some of us aren't. Some of us are going to like some of the characters in the screenplay and some of us aren't. But with the work load we have and the demands on the booker, then he's probably doing as good a job as he can do because quite frankly with the hours of television that we have to produce a week that we have to coordinate and create, it's amazing because it's just so totally different. Our company produces more television than anyone else, so it's real

tough.

I think he's done a good job. A lot of people may or may not agree with that point, but the issue is, I know how hard the guy works, I know how dedicated to the business he is, and I know that he wants to be successful. All of his decisions aren't going to be the right ones, but they darn sure aren't going to all be the wrong ones. I just believe a lot of people have been a little bit hard on him. I don't agree with everything he does, either. And he's given me the opportunity to voice my opinions when he and I meet at our planning meetings, so I can't ask for anything more than for somebody to let me express my ideas. I have that option. Sometimes he uses the ideas, sometimes he doesn't, but the point is I'm given the opportunity to express my views. Just because he doesn't take it doesn't mean I'm going to be upset about it. That's rather childish if they didn't use every idea I had, to be mad, that's just not the way it is. I don't want to get in that mindset.

Keller: Obviously the press may not be the appropriate place to do this, but if you felt comfortable talking about it, what are some of the ideas you have that you would like Dusty to adopt?

Ross: I really wouldn't want to get into that because when we meet we meet privately and we communicate privately. I respect him for allowing me that opportunity, and I really feel I would violate his trust if I said some of the things we talked about. They're not always about finishes, they're about a lot of different things we all have opinions on. Sometimes our opinions are wrong. I wouldn't want his job. Like I said, no matter who the booker is, they're always going to be criticized. The easiest part of being an insider-type fan, the easiest part to do, and frankly the most fun, is to book. It's easy to say, I'd like to see this match or this angle, and sometimes I've read some real neat things before. Some people have some real creative ideas. Some things aren't always as they seem and it's a lot harder to accomplish things than just writing it down. I get a kick out of reading it. I think it's great that somebody cares enough about what we do to spend time writing about it, but often times it's a great idea, but it may not be feasible because of the players you've got and other circumstances, as they say, that are beyond our control.

Wade Keller: Has or will Kip Frey as executive vice president enable Dusty Rhodes to do his job better than under Jim Herd?

Jim Ross: I think Dusty Rhodes will have his greatest opportunity to be successful with Kip Frey here. Kip is a very positive influence on Dusty. Kip is very detail-oriented. He likes meetings, he likes things done in a systematic and orderly fashion. That's good for all of us because we have so many details to attend to that we need every bit of checks and balances that we can. And we're starting to meet more and we're starting to

communicate better with Kip there. We have a better organized department than any other time since I've been on the payroll.

Keller: What is a typical five-day week for Dusty Rhodes in his position as booker? I don't think sports fans have a real grasp of what a five-day week is like for a general manager of a baseball team, so what insight can you give to the day-to-day operations of a WCW booker?

Ross: There's always deadlines. There's always commitments you have to do. Every week that goes by means that you need to have another week of booking on the other end. With us trying to do a better job on our syndicated TVs and promoting the local event, that information has got to be done six or eight weeks ahead of time. So for every week that goes by, you need to add another week onto the other end. So he's constantly doing booking. He's constantly, because of injuries and other things that happen because wrestlers can't appear, having to make amendments to the cards and make sure transportation arrangements are made. We have to do seven pay-per-views and often times those have to be booked 60 to 90 days in advance for them to do all their merchandising through Turner Home Entertainment. So he's constantly trying to create scenarios to meet different deadlines. He's like a newspaper editor who's got a story that needs to be written and it's got to be turned in—like, now.

There's always something that he's challenged with to get done. It's a never ending deal. Then there's constantly the counseling, heart-to-heart talks and social visits with the talent. Talking to other talent that might be inquiring about coming to work here. Then we do all of this TV. He has to format all the television, including the Saturday Night show, WorldWide show, and the Pro show. I format the Power Hour and the Main Event and the Canadian Power Hour, but they are approved by him. He approves them once I put them on paper. Then obviously if he cares to make a change in case I've forgotten it or something that shouldn't be there, then we make the changes and I go with it. So even though I format those shows, he still reviews them and approves them. So you can see there's a Clash to do, a pay-per-view to do, another week's booking to do, or his TV shows to do. That's not to mention talking with the talent. That's why sometimes you hear people say Dusty's a hard guy to get a hold of and he really is because he's normally in his office with his door shut trying to do his work. That's why Magnum is there and Magnum takes most of the calls from the guys unless it's necessary for Dusty to get involved. He doesn't have any free time and he doesn't work a half a day. He works hard.

The issue is, when you're doing that much creative work, not every song you write is going to be a hit, and every essay you write is not going to be remembered, but every booker I've ever worked with is in the same situation. Every angle didn't hit. And the ones which didn't hit, well

you're considered real stupid. "You know, that was dumb! Why do you do that?" The same angle may have worked somewhere else great, but for whatever reason it didn't get executed.

Keller: That brings up another question. There are two complaints that seem most prevalent against Dusty Rhodes. First, not enough clean finishes—and that might have a lot to do with the wrestlers, but if they're on payroll, they should do what the boss says—and second, the rehashing of old ideas. Is using old ideas and reformatting them necessary or is a booker being paid to come up with newer stuff, especially with the demographics WCW draws, which seems to include longer-term fans than in the WWF where it's a lot of kids?

Ross: I think the booker is paid to come up with things that work, whether it be new, novel, never-seen-before angles, or a remake of a classic, so to speak. Again, it's all real subjective. You could use a zillion analogies. It's like a piece of art. You see something someone's going to pay a million dollars for and you think, "My god, what is it? What is this thing I'm looking at?" The thing about it is the booker is paid to create scenarios that captivate the interest of the fans that will make them want to buy a ticket to the live events and also tune in to our television programs. Whether he accomplishes that with, as I said, brand new stuff or a remake, it really doesn't matter. Obviously we'd all like to come out with every angle an original, but that's rather difficult to do given we're dealing with the same set of props, a ring, wrestlers—wrestlers aren't props, but you know what I'm saying. But there's no space-age thing that wasn't around 20 years ago. Everything's stayed basically the same.

Keller: Except for something like the War Games concept.

Ross: Right, the gimmick type matches. So it's real hard to come up with brand new stuff. If you asked any booker, he'd probably tell you, "Yeah, if I could have my way, I'd come up with creative, brand new stuff for every angle," but unfortunately you're still dealing with a heel, you're still dealing with a babyface as a rule, and you're still going to compete in the same environment, so the storyline is what we're talking about here. And if you keep factoring them down, you still come down with good vs. evil. How you present good vs. evil is what the booker's trying to do. And again, that's what you and I and anyone else as a fan is more critical of. It's always been that way. I remember when I first got in the wrestling business, I was 19 and I would ride around with some veterans and I was refereeing and I remember them talking about how stupid the booker was. The boys do it, so it's always been a common trait. Again, the easiest part of our business is to create imaginary scenarios.

Keller: What about clean finishes?

Ross: I'm a proponent of more clean finishes

than we have been using, but again that's a decision that I'm not really involved in whatsoever. If it was an idealistic situation and I had my way, I would say yeah, I'd like to have more clean finishes than we have. But you had a good point earlier when you said a lot of those finishes depend on the talent. And that has to be taken into consideration. More often than not, if you have two highly talented wrestlers, you can accomplish what you need to accomplish by giving the fans a winner and a loser. But that's just a personal quirk, I guess.

Keller: Looking at Dusty Rhodes in comparison to an Ole Anderson or Ric Flair or the booking committees, what are some of the strengths you believe Rhodes has over those past bookers?

Ross: Probably Dusty has the most vision as far as being able to visualize a major event in his mind and a concept and being able to pull it off.

Keller: Does Dusty still get excited about his job or has he done this so long that it's almost strictly business, going through the motions, so to speak?

Ross: Oh no, he's still got great enthusiasm. He's a heck of a salesman. He gets people excited at production meetings and like I said, some of his major event concepts have been terrific. Quite honestly, he started doing some things with Crockett and I remember Bill (Watts) and I had meetings with them and we got a lot of ideas from Dusty on how to do big events in our territory. We did some real good stuff at one point in time in the SuperDome, you know with 20, 25, almost 30,000 people in there when it wasn't really fashionable, and it didn't get national press because it was back in the days of the national territories. Yeah, he's been real innovative there. One of his strongest traits that I would say overshadows others I've worked with is his ability to create a Starrcade or Great American Bash or SuperBrawl or WrestleWar, that kind of thing. And quite honestly, it's imperative that we have someone who has those traits because we do seven pay-per-views and four Clashes. You've got to have that. And the area that we are really working hard on is between those televised events and the house shows. He's does some real neat things in that situation as far as the big events are concerned.

Keller: Let's say six months from now, two years from now, or whenever, Dusty Rhodes retires, moves on, accepts a contract somewhere else for more money, is fired, whatever, but his position is vacated. Who's out there? Either within the company or outside the company, name five candidates who could possibly fill the WCW booking slot.

Jim Ross: I don't think I could give you five, to be quite honest with you. There are people that I think have a lot of potential, but there aren't many. It's a really demanding job. You've got to create four first run TV shows a week, 52 weeks a year; that's 208 hours of weekly TV you've got

The only other thing people might ask is how the wrestlers will respect a guy who's not a wrestler. But anyone who's been around Jim Cornette knows he's got one of the greatest minds in the business.

to create. Plus you've got to do seven pay-per-views and four live two-and-a-half hour prime time specials. So you've got to have a television mind, plus you've got to come up with the right situations in the arena that's going to stimulate the ticket buyer to come out, so you need arena background. It's a real, real tough combination to find somebody—one person—to do all of those things. It may take somewhere down the road a redefining of the term "booker" and making things more departmentalized where there's a booker, a head of his department. Then there are members of the department who work with the booker in their specific areas of responsibility. It's kind of like we're doing right now because my area is to format the "Power Hour" and the "Main Event". Everything is in the same time frame. I know what's airing on other shows. So everything is compatible as far as the time-line is concerned. Then I do it and present it to the booker who signs off on it.

But I don't know who's out there. I think Terry Allen in our company has a great deal of potential because he's got a very, very fertile mind and he loves the wrestling business. That's a real key thing. He's got so much character and determination. Just to be physically able to walk as he is after what he's gone through, it's a miracle. But he never quit and had a great desire to succeed. Those same traits we see every day in the office. He's one of these kind of guys who wants to keep learning, learning different aspects of the business. He's a great ally for Dusty. I think he's come up with some really good scenarios. I think the guys like dealing with him because Magnum is an honest guy. He's real up front. So I think he's got the traits it takes to be a booker some day.

I think that Jim Cornette probably is in the process right now of refining a lot of his booking skills, which is terrific. Hopefully he will be successful there.

Keller: In the case of Cornette, what are his strong and weak points in booking in your view?

Ross: Well, his strong points obviously are his creativity. One of his strong points obviously also is as an on-camera personality. He's tremendous. He's a great manager. I had the pleasure of working with him when we were both

basically just getting started working for (Bill) Watts in the Mid-South. I respect him immensely. He's doing something right now he really wants to do and I'm happy for him. I hope that what he's doing is basically educating himself on the art of being a booker and running a territory. That's got to be exciting as hell for him. I know he's probably doing right now what he's always wanted to do since he got established in the business. To say that I wouldn't love to have him in WCW would be a lie because I'd love to work with him in any capacity, be it on Saturday Night or whatever. But right now the guy's really happy and that's a real important aspect of our lives that needs to be considered. He'll always have a place here if he ever decided he wanted to come here. But I wish there was something we could do here in WCW to help him.

I'd love to have him on our Saturday show as a guest co-host and he could talk about Smoky Mountain Wrestling. I'm sure they'd be willing to work with him any way that they could. We've got lots of talent that's not been working a lot that he might be able to utilize, so there could be a cooperative effort made to work out some things with him. But he's got a bad taste in his mouth from his experiences with WCW and I can't say I blame him in the least. It's just going to take time. Right now he's probably doing the best thing for him. Mentally, he's got peace of mind and it's probably the best thing for him, so I'm happy for him.

Keller: How about any weaknesses Cornette would have at this point?

Ross: Probably the only weaknesses that Corney would have right now would be the actual practical experience of being a booker and being responsible for the TV show and the talent being there and who's gonna work with who and the production of the house shows. Those are the only weaknesses I can think of. And that's something he can't help. He's getting that experience right now. The only other thing that some people might ask is how the other wrestlers will respect a guy who's not a wrestler. The thing about it is anyone who's been around him knows he's got one of the greatest minds in the business. He's come up with finishes for a lot of matches his guys weren't even involved in. Some of the best in the business have confided in Corney on matches, so I don't think that should be a factor at all.

Keller: And he actually has been in the ring teaming with Stan Lane on the independent circuit taking bumps and dishing out punishment, albeit often with the tennis racket instead of his fist.

Ross: When you've got eight-zillion hours of video tape at home and you spend probably 12 to 14 hours of each waking day watching them when you can, you're going to be a student of the game. He is a really talented guy.

Keller: Combine that with the fact that some

of the best directors in Hollywood were never actors and some of the best general managers of football teams were never football players.

Ross: Exactly. In my career I've offended people because of my outspokenness on situations regarding a match or a program or an angle or whatever. I've probably said things—no, I'm sure I've said things I shouldn't have said and I've offended people. It's not like I offend everyone I come in contact with, but I offend some people I really didn't intend to offend, but I was just expressing my opinion on an issue in my industry that I felt I had some knowledge of. It was only my opinion; it's not carved in stone any place. It's just the way I felt. But it was honestly the way I felt about things.

Keller: Just so there's no confusion here, I want to establish that my opinion is always correct.

Ross: There you go. Well, mine isn't. I can tell you. That's the fun part about this business and that's what always keeps it exciting is that it's always changing. Some things that you think don't have a prayer get hot and some things that you think are going to be the greatest thing ever turn out to be nothin'.

Keller: How about Bill Watts? Would the booking position Rhodes currently holds need to be restructured if Watts were to take over that position?

Ross: Well, I don't think that will ever happen because he's pleased to be doing Omnitrition in Tulsa. He'll be the first to admit to ya' that the job of booker with the demands and requirements that WCW places on the booker make it virtually impossible for one man to do it all. The workload is just overwhelming. So Bill would say, I think—I'm certainly not speaking for him—that he couldn't do the job by himself. He'd do the job like he did in the past, like a lot of bookers do, they surround themselves with who they perceive to be creative, competent people. Bill, in his era, did tremendous episodic TV. He had great vision and created stars that are still wrestling today that got their start in that area. I think he would tell ya' that we're doing too much television and it's awfully, awfully hard to have good quality TV having to do that many first-run hours a week.

Keller: Is one of his strengths his ability to get wrestlers to follow instructions as opposed to attempting to run the show themselves or dictating what they will or will not do?

Ross: Well, he had a very unique way of communicating with guys. I don't recall anybody ever not wanting to do something with him. Bill was very persuasive, but he normally made sense. Another thing, too, is what's challenging now is we didn't have the guaranteed money contracts to the extent they have now. We did the last couple years, but they were minimal, six, eight, ten guys. But the attitudes have changed immensely from that day until now, so I don't know how he would react because he was

awfully demanding. A lot of these guys who think they're stars, I don't know how they'd react to that kind of leadership.

Keller: How about Eddie Gilbert, who himself said he thought he was next in line for the job?

Ross: I think he sort of has the same background, some of the same traits that Jim Cornette would have. Both got in the business very young in the same basic area and learned a very sound style of wrestling in that area. He's had lots of experience in the ring, so that helps him. He probably just needs the opportunity to see what he could do. I'm sure he'd do a fine job. The thing is, I just don't know if there's one person that's available that's grooming themselves.

But Eddie's got lots of talent. He's had lots of challenges in his life and hopefully they'll all work toward making him a stronger person and some day, some time, it'll lead to him getting to show the world what he can do. He's a real creative guy. He's got lots of good ideas. He could probably do some excellent television. The other aspect would be, well, how would he handle talent, some of the guys who have been in the business longer or who are making more money than he is? Those are just common questions you'd ask of anybody because of his youth. Those questions would only be answered by him and the guys in question. I certainly wouldn't have a problem working with him. I'm assuming it's a situation where he'll need to be given the opportunity somewhere down the road. It might not be a bad idea for him to try to get a position with somebody where he could work with a booker somewhere down the road. It's like a coach with a good record at high school, so he goes on to coach a junior college. Then he has great credentials and maybe it's time to go to a four year school. Sometimes it works, and you go on to the NFL. Sometimes it doesn't work and you go back to junior college. You just never know until you're in the heat of battle.

Keller: What is your impression of the TitanGate situation?

Ross: I have probably read less than a lot of people about all of these allegations that have been made against the WWF. I feel badly that things of this nature happen to anybody in this business because it probably is some indirect, trickle down theory, affects all of us to a certain extent. A lot of people, because they are so dominant and so strong in the industry, they are wrestling to an average person. Unfortunately, you get a lot of generalizations. "If it's going on in the WWF, then it must be going on everywhere else." First of all, a lot of the allegations being made haven't been proven. I didn't witness any of them, so I don't know if they're true or not true. But the allegations themselves certainly don't do anybody in our industry any favors. I hope they get settled and we can move on to more positive things where

it's a real good competitive atmosphere between them and us and the fans are going to be the ones to cast the deciding votes in that situation.

Keller: Hypothetically, let's say something happens and the WWF goes out of business? Would that necessarily be good or bad for wrestling?

Ross: Well, that's a real hypothetical because that's not going to happen, I don't think. But it would be bad for wrestling. The more places that the wrestlers can work and have an opportunity to earn a living, the better it is for the talent. The more places a guy like me can get a job if I lose my job here, the better off I am to be able to provide for my family and myself. It would be devastating for the business, I think. I hope it never happens and I don't think it ever will.

Keller: However, if regional promotions were to return, how would you take advantage of national cable television, something which was not really in existence at the peak of the territory days?

Ross: I think you use the cable to help build stars. If the NWA or WCW had territories, TBS could be used to highlight those stars within the territories that would be willing to cooperate with it. It would be a star-maker at that point.

Keller: What are your thoughts on steroids and the importance of doing everything possible to reduce or eliminate its illegal usage?

Ross: Wrestlers should be encouraged and counseled and everything possible should be done to the point of termination to discourage their use. We all know why, because they're illegal and unhealthy. I think the WCW and Kip Frey approached it the right way with the steroid policy. They're trying to get the guys information and encouragement and support and incentives. The spirit of the policy is positively written, no pun intended. It's a right way of approaching it, I felt. I hope our guys respect what's there and respect management's desires and come off of them. It's not necessary. I think it's been a deterrent in this business. I think it restricts intensity over long periods of time, thus matches have shorter durations. Guys seem to be more prone to injury, even though they heal up maybe quicker, and even though the guys say being on the gas allows them to withstand the bumps and bruises better. But I can see the mood swings and attitudes of guys that are on it all the time. Some days they're in a good mood and other days they're just some kind of animal, growling and making guttural sounds. It's not a pretty sight. So I believe that it's going to be a positive thing for everybody for them to be completely eliminated from the business. It is possible, but whether it's likely or not is in question.

Keller: When Jim Herd was replaced by Kip Frey, did you celebrate?

Ross: No. In fact, I felt bad for him because I knew how much he wanted the thing to succeed

I started doing all those background things on the pay-per-views and people seemed to like it because really nobody else was doing it. People remember it and it shows you respect the people that follow the sport for a long time.

and I know he got really emotionally involved in the business. Unfortunately, he didn't have a background in the wrestling aspect of the business to help him make better judgments and better decisions. I certainly didn't rejoice. He was a guy who was very complex and one who I had some of my greatest arguments with since I've been in the business. One of the big misconceptions that has been made is that Herd and I were best buddies, drinking buddies. From the time he left, it had been over a year since we had been out for dinner or a beer after work. He just was unbearable to be around and was very, very negative and very, very volatile. So I chose not to be around him. Unfortunately, there were some people that will generalize and have the misconception that he and I were fraternity brothers and we had a secret handshake and we hung out at happy hour every day. I respect the guy for his work ethic. He's one of those guys who may go out and have a few pops at night, but he will be at the office on time every day, work long hours, but that's it. He allowed himself to get emotionally caught up in his job. Where if you're prepared to do your job, it's a wonderful trait because it makes you successful when you have your background and you really get emotionally into it. You really want to do this job.

But he was misguided. I'm not saying as an individual he was misguided. He just did not have the knowledge and he made a lot of bad mistakes, like losing Ric Flair was ridiculous. Absolutely ridiculous. And it should never have happened. But it was a total lack of communication and trust. Both of those emotions should not have factored in. It's unfortunate it was a real emotional deal and the wrong decision was reached in my opinion. Everybody in our department could have a different opinion. This is just my opinion.

Keller: Some people have rationalized that it's a good thing he left because it forced WCW to groom some younger talent for a top role. For example, possibly Rick Rude would never have been given the opportunity to be in the position he's in now without the loss of Ric Flair. Is that a valid argument?

Ross: No it isn't. First of all, Rick Rude's growth is not going to be retarded by anybody.

Right now, he's as good as anybody in this business. He's a hell of a heel. So it doesn't make any difference who's in this company, Rick Rude is not going to be held back. He's too big of a talent. But the thing about it is, you never want to lose a performer with the versatility and the skills a Ric Flair possesses. You will find a role for them until they can't physically perform to their own qualifications. He will be his own worst critic. He will quit wrestling before he probably should because of something in his mind he doesn't like anymore. He's very meticulous in his craft and simply phenomenal. To not keep him, well that would be like the Texas Rangers not signing Nolan Ryan. You keep Nolan Ryan until his arm goes. Nolan Ryan will tell you when he can't throw his fast ball anymore and he wants out. So that was a big mistake. Probably of all the things that have been cussed and discussed in this Herd regime, that was probably his biggest, most glaring error.

Keller: What did Jim Herd bring to WCW that Kip Frey didn't bring?

Ross: I can't really think of anything. Maybe in the beginning, a lot of guys trusted him because he was a little older. Maybe that was an advantage because of his maturity. They looked at him different than Kip, who is in his early 30s.

Keller: Kip can only wait 30 years to gain that advantage?

Ross: You know how it is when you talk to somebody in a management position and they have white hair and they've been a professional 30 or 40 years. It's that experience factor. Herd, when he wanted to be, was a very engaging guy outside the office environment. Hell, he used to be a bartender. So he had a great gift of gab, so to speak. As far as business and the organization, and more importantly the attitude, there's nothing Herd had over Kip.

Keller: What is your reaction to the light heavyweight division?

Ross: I've been a big proponent of it. I think it should be around. It gives the guys who aren't monsters a chance to get involved in something that's believable and something that the fans will enjoy seeing and buy tickets to see. The guys we're using now in that division, they're diverse. They're really a unique mix. Overall, the division was established so guys who aren't huge could be put into something believable and meaningful. I like some of the things we've done. I would have liked to see us introduce it with more fanfare and more pre-planning. I think, because of Liger, the division is slowly getting more respect from people. I hope Scotty Flamingo is going to be able to accept the challenge and be a valuable asset in that division. Pillman's got to get over his injuries. Johnny B. Badd's trying to get better and he works hard. We're going to see how he progresses, but he's got some potential. I've always liked Brad Armstrong. I'd like to see him more involved. I think Liger is breathtaking.

Chris Benoit is a tremendous wrestler. I really and truly like the division because of some of the available talent that's out there in that division, be it a Japanese or Mexican star. There's a lot of things we can do with that division. Obviously we got the cream of the crop when we got Liger, but obviously there are some who are just a notch below him that are great to watch.

Keller: Tony Schiavone said on a broadcast that it's a good thing a light heavyweight division was created so wrestlers like Brian Pillman and Brad Armstrong have a chance to hold a title. Is that the right way to build the division, giving the impression at times that it is a minor league title for those who were not big enough to make it in the major division? Or is that realistic and the proper way to build it?

Ross: I really didn't hear the comment, but I imagine he meant, and it's a realistic statement, that Pillman's got a more realistic chance to be the light heavyweight champion than the heavyweight champion. I think it was directed toward the size factor. If Vader ever gets the world title, for example, and he weighs 450, are people going to buy a ticket to see Brad Armstrong challenge Vader for the title when Armstrong's a stout 220. Now that they have a division where there's not a size disadvantage every single night, they have the chance to compete on a level playing field for a specific title.

Keller: You've been criticized over the past year or so for various things, such as overexposure, overhyping certain wrestlers or certain matches, or being overenthusiastic. How do you respond to that? Are you good at accepting and evaluating criticism?

Ross: Criticisms I get are often accurate. I agree with a lot of them. I agree that at one time I was definitely overexposed on TV and it wasn't by choice. If I had been being paid by the program, I'd be pleased financially. It was a need situation and I was assigned to do the programs. Probably I get caught up in things, wanting to sell things and wanting something to be successful. I certainly have been guilty in the past of overselling something or trying to sell too much product as opposed to selling the match. I really enjoy the pay-per-views, because as a rule you can sit down and call the wrestling match without a memo stuck in your face to plug the hotline and then the magazine and then how to get a souvenir catalog. But those are divisions of our company, but I've been guilty of all those things. I generally take it pretty well in stride. Sometimes people make judgments based on misinformation that gets frustrating, but it doesn't make me mad or anything. I've gotten accused of shilling for the hotline because I get extra money for it. Under my current contract I get paid a salary and that salary pays me for whatever they ask me to do. So the hotline I do on Saturdays, and I have fun doing it, but I don't get paid extra. I make a good living and I'm happy doing what I do because I'm a wrestling fan that got to become a

wrestling announcer. What the heck, it doesn't take me that long to do it. I wouldn't be telling the truth if I said I didn't want to get paid extra for it, but that's not the terms I agreed to. But the next contract I have, maybe something will change in that regard.

Keller: How much of an effect do you think the quality of one particular episode of a show has to do with the ratings of that episode? Is the quality of the previous week's episode more important?

Ross: There are so many factors to weigh, more than just those two. I'll give you some examples. No show will be successful unless it is well lit and has good audio because we are all spoiled because of being a television viewer, it doesn't matter if you're watching a sporting event, movie, game show, or sit-com, you want to be able to see and hear the characters or the announcers. So, in other words, if someone had great shows, but the audio was low and lighting was sub-standard, you would soon grow impatient watching it and when they did have a little valley, you'd be more likely to leave because the show wasn't that pleasing to watch aesthetically anyway. So you have to have great television values and that's what Titan's been the forerunner at. They make a tremendous looking television product. It is technically just a piece of art. I mean, the vividness of the cameras, the lighting, the audio, and the edit. They are just tremendous within the whole television industry, not just wrestling, but TV in general. So you gotta have a technically sound show.

The second thing you need to do is I'm a big proponent of episodic television. That's how I was personally trained in the business. McMahon has been successful without doing episodic TV per se. He's been very successful at it, as a matter of fact. So, consequently, I don't know if the episodic way is the best. I do know that weekly, one hour programs like Dallas, Falcon Crest, and this type thing always bring the storyline along week to week and I think that's important in wrestling.

I think people are just as turned on by a clearly defined storyline that goes week to week with the primary characters as they are with them trying to come up with a marquee main event every week. I don't have a problem with marquee main events, but quite frankly there's only so many marquee players, so even though it's a main event match in position, it's not a main event match in perception. So I think the storylines should be made more important in our programs. And we've done a lot to improve our look, so hopefully some of the things I've heard casually discussed that sound real entertaining and thought provoking will come true. They may work and they may not. I think it's a key element you need in weekly television, especially in syndication. It's hard to do it on the Saturday show because of the format. The folks are more apt to be regular viewers if you give them some hooks, some questions to be answered, leaving

them without full knowledge of what to expect next week. We don't always do a good enough job of promoting "next week".

Keller: What kind of preparation goes into a live pay-per-view or Clash broadcast for you? Do you not prepare because of your experience or do you surround yourself with fact cards on the wrestlers or do you talk to wrestlers or bookers ahead of time to see what they want stressed?

Jim Ross: Every show you do, you know it has a focus, and it has a reason, whether a TBS show should focus on pay-per-views, Clashes, or Omni events. The syndicated shows are more focused on the arena events with a secondary focus on pay-per-views. Every show serves a need that's clearly defined even before you get out there. I know what's booked and what direction we're going as far as the feuds. It doesn't take a rocket scientist to tell that Steamboat is pretty pissed off at Rude right now. If I have a Steamboat match, I know what context to tie into it between holds, and that's Rude.

Keller: How about specifically before pay-per-views and Clashes?

Ross: Before a pay-per-view or a Clash, I'll generally spend a week before the event preparing all my notes and looking up all kinds of material for each person on the card, define that one fact I can use that night, or two things that I can tie in. I always talk to the guys that afternoon to see how the guys are feeling and if they're injured. And if they're injured, I find out if that will prevent them from doing certain things. So I prepare about a week ahead of time. I do a lot of reading, a lot of note-taking, but when I go out to broadcast, there are very few notes on my format sheet. There are buzz words, and I try to read my notes so many times that the buzz words remind me of what I'm looking for. I try to do that. I don't know why other announcers don't do it enough. Some of the younger guys are coming along and doing it.

One thing that really offends me—we do it sometimes, I've been guilty of it—sometimes inadvertently and sometimes it's premeditated, unfortunately you say things you wish you didn't have to say because you know it's going to insult the intelligence of longtime fans. But that's one of the hazards of the duty. It goes with the territory, unfortunately. So I try to overcompensate for that if I can. I started doing all those background things on the pay-per-views and the Clashes and people seemed to like it because really nobody else was doing it. And a lot of the information was known. I don't have any revelations there. From time to time I'll have something new, but people remember it and it shows you respect the people that follow the sport for a long time by acknowledging something they experienced as a fan. A reference to Johnny Valentine or talking about some of the other champions. It's just something I want to do and management is fully

behind it.

Keller: Speaking of young announcers, what is your impression of the progress of Eric Bischoff at this point?

Ross: I think Eric has gotten a lot better since he's been here. He's getting a lot more comfortable on camera. He was a little stiff when he first came to work here, but he had a heck of a lot of pressure on him, too. Obviously, he came from a totally different environment from this place. He's really progressed well. He's writing and producing the *WCW Magazine* (TV segments). He and Teddy Long do the main event. I think it's too bad that more people can't hear them. I think more people would like to hear them, believe it or not. I mean "believe it or not" in that a year and a half ago nobody ever thought of those two working together. Teddy was managing and I guess Eric was in Minnesota. So, I mean, it's a new deal and I suggested they put them together and everybody agreed upstairs. They're doing a lot better than a lot of people would perceive. I've been really pleased with the effort they're putting out.

I think Eric's niche is doing what he's doing right now. He enjoys writing; he's getting better at his writing. He's gonna get better at picking out footage. He's getting more comfortable on camera, that's a key thing. But I think a news, interviewer, feature type capacity is where he is probably going to flourish in the early part of his career. Then somewhere along the line he may move into more mainstream play-by-play.

Keller: How about Tony Schiavone? He's been a longtime colleague of yours and he's been in the old NWA, the WWF, and WCW. What's your impression of what he brings to WCW?

Ross: He's a real organized person. He has a lot of detail things to do. He's very systematic with good organization skills. I think he learned a lot of those at Titan because he had the opportunity to do several different things. He produced Coliseum Home Video in addition to working on the air. I think what he brings to the table which has been really good is organization of who does what interview where and keeping track of the local customized information that goes into the shows for the local events and what TVs need to go in. He does a lot of meticulous work that if it's mistaken, it's really glaring, such as the wrong promo airing in the wrong market.

I think he's probably in my opinion underrated as a play-by-play announcer. He's got great voice inflection, he's got genuine enthusiasm. He's a fan like me. We talk about it all the time. Both of us, like a lot of people, in grade school and junior high didn't mind people knowing we were wrestling fans, but in high school we started keeping it a secret because we got tired of the ridicule and persecution for being wrestling fans. I think a lot of people can identify with that. We have a lot in common in that regard. Tony and

Jesse, I think, are really going to mesh well. He's really easy to work with and he works hard. You know he's tireless because he's got five kids.

Keller: Missy Hyatt's role as an announcer in WCW has been criticized by a lot of people. She's the only female broadcaster in WCW and she's been portrayed off and on to differing degrees in the stereotypical "dumb blond" role. She sometimes portrays herself as more interested in interviewing men in the locker room or dating Tom Zenk than doing what you do, which is build up matches or feuds. Is the natural reaction to that, "Oh, it's just wrestling and that's what our fans want." Or is there a better role for either Missy Hyatt or another female announcer to play a more straight role to add a different perspective to the broadcasts?

Ross: I think that Missy is cast into the role that she is in because we feel that best fits her personality. Missy is a very bubbly, spontaneous person. If you met her in a hotel somewhere or a restaurant, you're going to see the same person you see on television. She's very natural on camera. She's there to add some sex appeal and some sizzle. She has had a lot of television exposure from the days on World Class on ESPN and their widespread syndicated network, to the Mid-South network through syndication, then to Crockett when he bought it out, then to TBS. So when you think of her as a television character—and that's what she is, a television character—we're portraying Missy to be a quasi-journalist. Hell, I'm a quasi-journalist. I'm not Dan Rather, either. So it's an entertainment entity and she's a character in that scheme of things. She's there to add some humor at times, some sex appeal at times, and to change the pace at times.

I'd like to see her do more interviews and structure them so she's asking more pertinent questions, questions that are predetermined. But, over the course of time, I have no idea why the American public has been infatuated and emotional with a bonafide opinion on aptly endowed, blond women. It goes back to May West and Marilyn Monroe and Jane Mansfield. Yeah, they're stereotypes, but it still sells. Look at other television shows. She's not trying to reinvent Connie Chung or Jane Pauley. She's closer to Goldie Hawn than Jane Pauley. What we hope is she's an entertaining character on a television program that has gotten lots of exposure. You can't discount her name identity. I'll tell you one thing, when I was doing the Main Event with her, and I've worked with her on and off for a long time on various programs, I probably get as many questions from guys about her as I do about any wrestler I've had here. You do have an opinion on her and yes she is often criticized and we get mail and calls about what she wears. They're reacting. We're not going to put her in a compromising deal. That thing in the horse trough surprised everyone, especially Missy. The issue is, I don't think the company is going to let women get into a degrading situation. I hope that women who read this aren't offended.

It isn't WCW's opinion that all women are like Missy Hyatt. Missy Hyatt is a character that's been developed over the last several years that we're just trying to take advantage of in a controlled environment. She's not on doing color because that's not her forte'. She's doing a "Missy Does Mail" segment and that's structured for her. I think she's a valuable character for what we're doing within her little character description.

Now, the other issue is as far as a legitimate female journalist who is not as striking or glamorous perhaps as Missy Hyatt, maybe more articulate or businesslike, more conservative, I think there is a place for someone like that in our company.

Keller: Probably in all sports broadcasting?

Ross: Absolutely. The way people get a position is to make an aircheck, put something on videotape, and send it to WCW. Missy may be miscast. But it's just a situation where she's in a controlled situation doing specialized reports and she's there because of the entertainment value, some humor sometimes or gossip. She also has the second-highest response on her hotline segment. To say she has no purpose in the company is ludicrous.

Keller: What is your view on the number of pay-per-views that should be promoted in this age of wrestling?

Ross: As a business we're probably promoting too many pay-per-views. If we promoted four pay-per-views a year, I think that would be very, very advantageous. I think that's the thing to do, four pay-per-views and four Clashes.

Keller: Do you think the total number of dollars taken in through pay-per-view would increase with four shows instead of eight?

Ross: I believe we'll be able to build the buyrates because we'll have a better build-up and a better product and a better storyline. We'll have more time to develop some interesting things.

Keller: And less exposure, so there will be a reason to attend the arena shows again?

Ross: Well, that's it. The main thing is it's going to re-emphasize the house shows. I think we ought to have four pay-per-views with a title defense on one, maybe two at most. Have three theme events, a WarGames or something, and then one title defense out of four.

Keller: Similar to the WWF's theme shows like Rumble and Survivor Series?

Ross: Right. Then the title shots return to be an important, exclusive part of arena shows. Maybe once a year you have a champion defend the World Title on the Clash when a feud is coming to an end.

Keller: That is what Vince McMahon used to do on Saturday Night's Main Events on NBC.

I think Eric (Bischoff) has gotten a lot better since he's been here. He's getting a lot more comfortable on camera. He was a little stiff when he first came to work here. I think Eric's niche is doing what he's doing right now. He enjoys writing; he's getting better at it. He's gonna get better at picking out footage. He's getting more comfortable on camera—that's a key thing. But I think a news, interviewer, feature type capacity is where he is probably going to flourish in the early part of his career. Then somewhere along the line he may move into more mainstream play-by-play.

He would have World Title matches involving the people at the end of a house show run. Then he wouldn't lose any house show interest because another challenger was already being built up.

Ross: It's was great planning. The business now has to serve so many masters. It used to be just house shows. Now it's diversified and the attention is split. There's pay-per-view, hotlines, magazines, merchandising. Now it's like the Home Shopping Network, we've always got something to pitch. I wish we didn't have to do that. We probably have to think of a better way of doing that, in a more condensed form. We can't eliminate those revenue sources.

Keller: If you could hand pick one wrestler to join WCW who is not currently part of WCW, who would that be?

Ross: Well, I mentioned on your radio show that it would be Hulk Hogan because obviously he is the most marketable, most recognizable name in the history of the wrestling business. He has done more good things for the wrestling business than the bad things he is now being accused of. He has created an awareness for our industry that cannot be measured in dollars and cents because of the way the WWF marketed him. If you take everything into consideration

and weigh everything out, he has been a whole lot better for wrestling than he has been bad for wrestling. It's just unfortunate that the focus lately has been on the steroid controversy. But you look at the guy who has created so much awareness for our business and created sponsors and opened doors to commercials and wrestlers being in movies. He's opened the doors. Now whether other wrestlers get the same opportunities or take advantage of those opportunities remains to be seen. He did a lot for the business. I say this with you knowing I've never met Hulk Hogan, nor have I spoken to Hulk Hogan throughout my career. So it isn't that he and I are good buddies — to get back to that Jim Herd returning handshakes theory. I do know that when Hulkamania started the business seemed to explode. I know that we had some phenomenal business in our area because of the heightened interest in wrestling in general that was stimulated by the character Hulk Hogan. I feel badly for the stuff that has gone on and you certainly want to think and hope a lot of it isn't true.

But for those of us getting a paycheck regularly out of this business, you've got to say Hogan helped us get jump-started. With him as a stimulant, you have a syndicated network that developed. And so they (the WWF) became the prototype for what we're doing. They had this character Hogan who starred in a movie and was the star of their show and then they combined that with a technically superb product lighting- and audio-wise, and then they went out and were able to clear excellent timeslots on very viable television stations. But the core, the heartbeat of that whole syndicated effort and mass clearance of television stations was because the WWF was so popular. The reason they were so popular was because of Hulk Hogan. So when others saw that you could go out to a market you never had gone to and talk to a station and clear your show and sell advertising on your show to create a new stream of income, well, what a hell of an idea. That's what we did in the Mid-South in our region. That's what Crockett did in the Mid-Atlantic and then he expanded. We expanded some. But everybody followed McMahon's structure because it was so perfect in how it worked. But McMahon was riding on the popularity of his own creativity as he created Hulk Hogan. Some people perceive McMahon as an enemy, and he's another guy I've never met. But when you make a living off of this business, you've got to admire what he's done and because he has elevated wrestling to where it has created more money streams and has higher revenues than ever before. That allows guys like me to make more money than my predecessors made.

Keller: But obviously no matter what good he has done, he should also be held accountable for that which he has done wrong?

Ross: I don't know if those things will be

proven or if they are true. McMahon is a human and he makes mistakes, but I can only judge him professionally. I'm not condoning these charges, I haven't seen anything or talked to someone who saw what happened, but the only thing I can judge events on is that he has through his and the WWF's success, created a field where I can make a very good living. If we didn't have the syndicated ad revenue and pay-per-view and prime time specials, I wouldn't have the opportunities I have now. But certainly I'm not downplaying the charges, but I can't comment on them without knowledge. If it's proven, then we've got a different set of circumstances.

Keller: But at this point, we've got gross inconsistencies and lies on one side, and a greater level of consistency on another side.

Ross: It's unfortunate that people's personal lives have to get involved in the business.

Keller: Is illegal drug use by a role model who preaches against it personal? Is somebody having to have sex with the boss to get advancements personal?

Ross: You're right about that. But I'm talking about big things about Pat Patterson being a homosexual. I'm happy to say I'm a heterosexual, but I certainly don't have homophobia. But I don't think that's a fair analogy that all homosexual men have no morals or no character.

Keller: I'd be disappointed if that was something that came out of this coverage. But I don't think the idea that all heterosexuals rape somebody for job advancements has come out of this coverage, either.

Ross: I agree with that. I'll be happy when the whole industry can get back to focusing on producing interesting and thought-provoking exciting TV and having exciting house shows and having everybody talk about how bad that angle was or how good this was as it related to the product.

Keller: Although would you agree that when we eventually get back to that stage that it was worth going through this stage if that means steroid use is cut down, people don't have to sleep with somebody of the opposite sex or same sex to keep their job, and there isn't that type of abuse and lack of accountability? If all of that "good" comes out of this "bad", then would you say that we shouldn't complain about what's going on? After all, in the end this will have been beneficial for the business and beneficial to those who want to keep their jobs based on their wrestling skill, not who they sleep with?

Ross: I think that's probably the healthiest way to look at it because these situations have been well-covered and they're real in the sense that these allegations exist. I guess the healthiest way mentally to look at it is just what you're saying. Yes if anything good comes out of this thing, such as a heightened awareness of steroid abuse as a major issue, then it was worthwhile.

